

**Emotional Safety and Identity Expression Within Online Learning  
Environments in Higher Education: Insights from A Canadian College**

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy.

Department of Educational Research,  
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**Emotional Safety and Identity Expression Within Online Learning  
Environments in Higher Education: Insights from a Canadian College**

Karen Fiege, BA, M.Ed.

This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma.

Signature: 

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**Abstract**

Assuring quality learning is increasingly important to higher education institutions (HEIs) in Canada, especially with continued e-marketplace, online enrolment growth, and programming internationalization. This thesis narrows the topic of quality assurance (QA) in learning to emotional safety and identity expression in online learning environments (OLEs). Creating and facilitating a safe OLE is imperative for many reasons, most notably because it can positively impact retention, learner satisfaction, and academic success.

This thesis will argue that feeling safe within an OLE is a necessary condition for learners to express aspects of their identity, resulting in a perceived increase in grades. Identity expression is part of transformational learning and thus becomes important to teaching and learning. The conditions for expressing identity online, therefore, ought to be encouraged and enhanced, making the role of the instructor paramount in this aspect of quality.

The study was conducted by gathering the thoughts and experiences of nine instructors and nine learners (n=18) using a single-site data gathering methodology. Through study findings, this thesis contributes to educational research in four ways. One, my theoretical framework is based on Illeris' (2007, 2014a, 2018a) learning and identity theory, which supports the

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emerging notion that identity is intrinsically connected to and centrally positioned within the overall learning process. Two, I gathered perspectives and experiences of both instructors and learners on this topic, which is uncharacteristic within educational research yet arguably critical when developing a comprehensive understanding of such topics and in the design and provision of HE supports and services. Three, this research study extends the sparsely researched area of emotional safety in conjunction with identity expression within HE OLEs and confirmed its importance and role in QA. Four, the findings support the importance of an emotionally safe OLE and such an OLE can positively impact learner grades and experience.

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To my dearly loved and beautiful children Brianna, Gavin, and Amelia, I love you all so deeply. Thank you for supporting me in your own way, bringing me a cup of tea, "writing" your own paper on the computer beside me, or giving hugs throughout my journey. I hope by completing this PhD to demonstrate that you too can achieve your goals. Always surround yourselves with authentic love, friendship, and laughter. I am excited to be witness to what brings joy to your life and the journeys you embark upon!

And finally, to my husband, Jason, whom I love immensely and wish to extend an extra thank you. Through the ups and downs, the tuition payments, the late nights, the anxiety of deadlines, and everything in between, I know you supported me the entire way and I am very thankful. Yes, you can now ask me, "Is it done yet?" My response is ready!

*"It was found that expressing yourself while looking after twins was difficult."*

*(Grandpa, 2019)*

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## List of Abbreviations

AUCC	Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada
CAQC	Campus Alberta Quality Council British Columbia's Degree
CMEC	Council of Ministries of Education, Canada
DQAB	Degree Quality Assessment Board
ELL	English Language Learners
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution(s)
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IT	Information Technology
OUCQA	Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance
OER	Open Educational Resources
OLE	Online Learning Environment(s)
PDPIE	Planning, Design/Development, Production, Implementation, and Evaluation
QA	Quality Assurance
TL	Transformative Learning
WCC	Western Canadian College

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Motivation for Research

Under the larger research canopy of quality assurance (QA) in higher education (HE), this research study set out to explore the subtopics of emotional safety and identity expression within online learning environments (OLEs) at a Canadian college with a cross-section of instructors who taught online and learners enrolled in online courses. This study was also intended to ascertain whether these subtopics were of any importance or were perceived as impacting grades. Emotional safety and identity expression within HE OLEs are elements of QA and a promising research area within the fields of HE instructional design, educational development, teaching, and evaluation.

Interest in these subtopics and thus my motivation for this research is threefold. One, an appreciation of the challenges, ongoing commitment, and care needed to design, facilitate, evaluate, and administer OLEs grew from my experiences during my tenure at Western Canadian College (WCC)<sup>1</sup> as a classroom instructor, instructional designer, applied researcher, and teaching and learning consultant. There seemed to be a sincere desire among those I worked with to achieve a high level of quality, but the process towards this goal was fraught with challenges, often resulting in negative emotions such as nervousness, unpreparedness, fear of failure or social embarrassment,

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<sup>1</sup> WCC is a pseudonym assigned to a real Canadian college used in this research study to better protect participants' anonymity.

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workload concerns, frustration from lack of technical expertise, discomfort from a perceived lack of skill in strategizing learners' content and technical concerns. Many WCC instructors I worked with felt that teaching online was more challenging than classroom teaching and required a new skill set. It was not uncommon for these same WCC classroom instructors to be assigned to teach online versions of their courses with little to no preparation time, additional support, or training. There are many reasons for why this occurred, none of which detracted from their sincere desire to create and facilitate a high-quality OLE.

I wondered whether these types of negative emotions and experiences could inadvertently impact the quality of the OLEs and the WCC instructors' overall experience teaching within an OLE. Acknowledging, overcoming, or even working through these emotions could arguably be as important for these instructors as integrating new technologies or applying new teaching strategies. Eleanor Roosevelt once reasoned:

You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself..."I can take the next thing that comes along." You must do the thing you think you cannot do (1960, pp. 29-30).

Two, QA measures were being introduced at WCC for online programming.

From an administrative and accreditation perspective, WCC required assurances that they would be meeting the prescribed learning outcomes in a consistent and coherent online learning experience across its program areas.

External stakeholders played a significant role in this QA strategy, and significant effort and resources were allocated to instructional design and multimedia development. While important, emotional safety and identity

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expression are aspects of QA that are typically overlooked in institutional initiatives.

Three, the course work required for this PhD provided another opportunity to explore the topics of emotional safety and identity expression within online learning in adult education. These topics were new to me, and the more I reflected upon them, the more interested I became in pursuing research in this topic area. Emotional safety and identity expression, especially within online learning environments, was not a part of any conversation I had ever had with colleagues and administrators at WCC or in any of my teaching and learning networks. I am uncertain whether this was due to its lack of importance within teaching practices or these topics were unknown to instructors and curriculum designers. To create a palpable research problem, I combined my experiences with WCC instructors and their expressed fears with institutional advances in QA, with my coursework addressing aspects of emotional safety and identity expression.

## **1.2 Problem**

A critical component of QA in HE is creating safe online OLEs where learners feel safe to express aspects of their identity or self-disclose to their peers or instructor. The problem is thus: with the continued growth and popularity of online learning at HE institutions (HEIs) in Canada, insufficient resources and educational research are being directed towards QA in a systematic, overt manner. As such, notable inequities exist in which aspects of QA are researched and provided resources and funding, with little to no research,

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funding, or resources directed towards emotions within online teaching and learning, emotional safety, and identity expression in OLEs. The aspects in the QA literature that does exist pertains more to course design (Lowenthal & Hodges, 2015; Sanga, 2017), online teaching (McGee, Windes, & Torres, 2017), feedback and assessment strategies (Ruey, 2010), and online learner support services (Bailey & Brown, 2016). This research is critical to QA, but ensuring an emotionally safe online learning environment where instructors and learners feel safe to express identity is arguably just as significant as the result, which can positively impact retention, allow for more effective and timelier instructor feedback, and positively impact learner satisfaction, motivation, engagement, self-regulation, and, ultimately, academic success (Arguedas, Daradoumis, & Xhafa, 2016; Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiago, 2017).

### **1.3 Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this research study.

- To what extent are feelings of emotional safety connected to the expression of identity within a higher education (HE) online learning environment (OLE)?
- Is the expression of identity and feelings of emotional safety within HE OLEs important to learners and instructors?
- Does identity expression within an OLE have a perceived positive impact on learner grades?



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- What role does an HE online instructor play in creating and maintaining an emotionally safe OLE?

#### **1.4 Theoretical Framework**

My theoretical framework was inspired by Knud Illeris' (2014a) learning and identity theory and was the structure by which I philosophically, epistemologically, methodologically, and analytically approached the data (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Later in this chapter, I will detail Illeris' learning and identity theory and explain my rationale for choosing it. First, I will explore what learning theories are and why they are of any importance or relevance to my theoretical framework and thus to this research study.

In simplistic terms, learning theories attempt to explain how we receive and process information within a learning environment and, since their inception in the 1800s, they have evolved. Illeris (2018a, 2018b) published detailed accounts of the evolution of learning theories, from Gestalt's psychology to American behaviourism, Russian cultural-historical theory, Piaget's constructivism, Dewey and Skinner's behaviourism, and beyond. This historical detailing of various learning theories highlights the evolutionary nature of learning theories. Detailing each of these types of learning theories is not necessary for this research study, but noting its evolutionary nature is necessary. Illeris' (2014a) learning and identity will likely evolve as new information, new understandings, or different ways of viewing existing information emerge. The evolving nature of learning theories is beneficial to those involved in the process of designing, administering, and instructing

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aspects of training and learning. The benefit of a learning theory is in its attempt to explain the process of learning so that learning and learning environments can be optimised. As new information and understandings emerge, learning theories can adopt, then adapt, all while remaining a beneficial foundation for the optimization of training, support, and learning (MacCallum, Day, Skelton, & Verhaart, 2017; Rucker, 2017).

The development of and reliance on learning theories, especially within educational research and instructional design, is not without criticism. Often suffering from extremes, at times learning theories seem either too narrow or too large in scope or, transversely, either too broad or too narrow for the intended audience. For example, some learning theories may consider only the notion of a hegemonic group of adult learners within degree programs at universities while overlooking the diversity and unique nature of individual learners or even learners in diploma or certificate programs at community colleges or technical institutes. In addition, learning theories are criticised for negating cultural attributes, personalities, learning challenges, language or technology barriers, or life experiences of individual learners. Learning theories are also slower to integrate advances in various fields, such as anthropology, psychology, and neuroscience, and do not always fully appreciate aspects of individuality and identity. These criticisms are important to acknowledge and contextualise but should not deter from relying on them when undertaking QA measures or optimising learning environments.

A learning theory as the basis of a theoretical framework is credible, though not widely observed within the literature. I chose Illeris' (2014a) learning theory

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as the basis of my theoretical framework because it further cements the notion and thus my assumption that identity is an integral component of the transformative learning (TL) process.

Like other mental conditions the identity is created, developed, and changed through learning – which all takes place in an interplay with the innate dispositions that are integrated in the learning processes and thereby can influence the learning as well as the identity. (Illeris, 2014a, p. 69)

Illeris (2014a) proposed a structural model (Figure 1.1) detailing the processes and dimensions involved in TL that result in a "change in the identity of the learner" (p. 40).

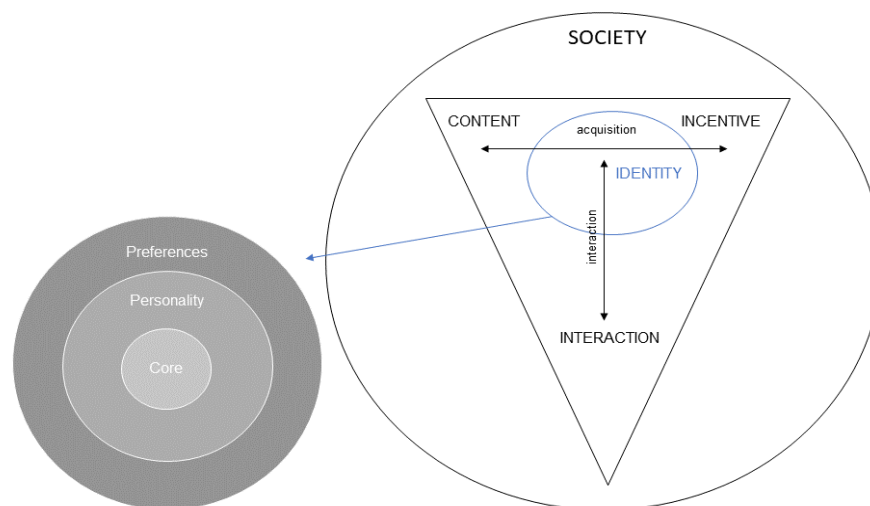


Figure 1.1 Processes and dimensions of learning (Illeris, 2014a, p. 35).

In Illeris' (2014a) learning and identity theory, identity is positioned centrally and intersects with social interactions and acquisition of knowledge and information. Because the concept of identity is complex, Illeris subdivided identity into three nested layers: core, personality, and preferences. Starting

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from the outer layer and working inward, the preference layer refers to a learner's automatic preferences and this layer is changed more easily by situations and social functioning (Illeris, 2014a). This could be evident in preferences and automatic reactions to daily routines (Illeris, 2014a). Of note for this layer is that nothing of importance pertains to identity changes; it is just more accommodated. The personality layer is more stable than the preferences layer and "includes who and how the individual wants to be and appear in relation to others and the surrounding world," whereas identity is more susceptible to influences (Illeris, 2014a, p. 72). Illeris placed conditions such as "values, attitudes, convictions, meanings, understandings, forms of behaviour, patterns of experience, objectives, and social elements like manners, conventions, habits of communication, patterns of collaboration, empathy, obligingness, social distance, and caution" (2014a, pp. 72-73).

The inner and final layer, core, is what makes a learner unique and is "developed and changed by learning processes during the life course" (Illeris, 2014a, p. 72) in a gradual manner. Illeris (2014a) likened the core layer to Erikson's (1968) concept of ego-identity and Giddens' (1991) concept of self-image. It is also where Illeris (2014a) positioned gender and family identity. Core identity needs to secure continuity and is only changed in dramatic, crisis-like, or innovative processes (e.g., having a child) (Illeris, 2014a).

Learning can be viewed as an addition or as resulting in a change (i.e., transformative learning) (Illeris, 2014a). Illeris (2014) contended that there many areas that can change in transformative learning, such as psychotherapeutic, cognitive, and one's identity. The addition of identity and

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understanding identity expression within the learning process is a critical component of this theoretical framework and research study. The underlying assumption of Illeris' (2014a) theory is that learning and identity are interconnected and should be viewed and researched jointly. Identity is central to the learning process. Thus, when examining or conducting educational research, issues pertaining to and stemming from a learner's identity should be considered.

As previously stated, Illeris' (2014a) learning and identity theory is the basis for my theoretical framework, meaning that I approached the data with the assumption that identity is complex and positioned centrally within the learning process. Although learning theories have criticisms, I selected this learning theory mainly for its evolutionary nature to integrate new ideologies and research as well as its comprehensiveness and inclusion of identity within the learning process.

### **1.5 Online Learning in Canada**

Online learning enrolment at Canadian HEIs continues to grow per annum. From 2016-2017, "17% of Canadian post-secondary students were taking at least one online course for credit; 18% in universities, and 19% in colleges outside Québec. Of all credit course enrolments, about 8% were fully online, representing 1.36 million online course registrations" (Canadian Digital Learning Research Association, 2019, p. 15). A comprehensive Canadian research study (Bates, 2018) tracked online course development across HE

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institutions in Canada; the results were congruent with the online enrolment growth of the later report.

Over the period 2011–2016, the number of institutions offering online courses [in Canada] has increased by 11%, a growth rate in the number of institutions moving into online education of around 2% per annum. In the last few years, even the smaller institutions have moved to offer online learning courses and programs. (Bates, 2018, p. 11)

A similar report estimated a growth of 1.3 million online course registrants in the province of Ontario alone (Contact North, 2015). With continued increases in enrolment, many Canadian HE institutions consider online learning as "critical for their future and have ensured that it is generally of high quality" (Canadian Digital Learning Research Association, 2019, p. 9). Quality assurance is important and linked to learner satisfaction (Rodriguez, Ooms, & Montañez, 2008).

If the quality of online learning is crucial to the future of HEIs in Canada and to learner satisfaction, a clear understanding of what quality means and encompasses as well as how it can be assured within online learning is vital. Addressing issues of quality in OLEs is beginning to appear within the literature (e.g., Blicek et al., 2018; Markova, Glazkova, & Zaborova, 2017; Martin, Polly, Jokiahho, & May, 2017). The slow emergence of QA research pertaining to OLEs is encouraging, but it is not substantive enough given its importance to strategic growth, institutional reputation, learner retention, satisfaction, success, and achievement. The Canadian context provided a national backdrop to this study and illustrated how online enrolment at HEIs in Canada continues to climb, thus necessitating the need for QA.

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## 1.6 WCC Context

Contextualising the HE Canadian college selected for this study should allow for better appreciation of the perspectives shared by participating learners and instructors while also providing enough information for readers to compare my findings to other study findings with comparable contexts. This research study was conducted at Western Canadian College (WCC), which is a multi-campus community college in Canada. HEIs in Canada are the responsibility of the provinces and territories. There is no single national Canadian HE system, but rather HE institutions report to and are funded by provincial or territorial governments.

Western Canadian College is a board governed HE institution in Canada with funding from the provincial government. It prides itself on being a comprehensive community college with regional stewardship responsibilities, a strong focus on learner needs, and a goal of delivering quality, accessible, and affordable multimodal curricula (WCC, 2018). WCC offers

broad programming, including certificates, diplomas, foundational learning, and upgrading programs. Our programs and services are learner-centred, outcome-focused, and designed to provide graduates with opportunities to improve their lives, prepare for further education, and advance their careers. (WCC, 2018, p. 5)

Like other HE Canadian institutions, WCC experienced a sharp increase in enrolment and sought innovative ways to meet learner and staff needs, including further expansion of multimodal delivery of its offerings (WCC, 2018). A sharp increase in enrolment and the need for further online offerings can, at times, come at the expense of quality. However, quality of learning is

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clearly articulated within WCC's mandate and thus is a strategic priority. WCC is

dedicated to providing people in our city and region with access to high-quality, efficient, and effective lifelong learning opportunities and to the responsible educational, fiscal, and environmental stewardship of resources. (WCC, 2018, p. 5)

To actualise WCC's mandate, QAs need to be met within these multimodal learning pathways.

### **1.7 Structure of Thesis**

This thesis contains an abstract plus five chapters. Chapter 2 critically examines literature pertaining to the quality and QA of online learning in HE, emotions in learning and emotional safety, and identity expression and the role of the instructor in OLEs. Chapter 3 discusses my research design strategy and methodology and presents research paradigms, methodology, ethical considerations, and the limitations of this study. Chapter 4 presents my qualitative argument, data gathered from the interviews, and some critical reflection. Finally, Chapter 5 reviews my original aims of the study; summarises and discusses the findings; provides implications for policy, research, and practice; and provides my concluding thoughts.

### **1.8 Summary**

This chapter outlined my motivation for this research study, which stemmed in part from my experiences at WCC, including writing module papers and introducing quality assurance measures at WCC. Four research questions were presented as well as an overview of the research problem. The



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Canadian context illustrated how enrolment in OLEs at Canadian HEIs continues to climb as does growing awareness of QA. Western Canadian College was the HE institution selected for this research study, and it prides itself on ensuring multimodal, quality curriculum to learners who geographically dispersed.

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## **Chapter 2: Literature Review of Quality, Emotional Safety and Identity Expression in OLEs**

### **2.1 Overview**

This chapter is divided into three sections. First, quality of learning in HE will be defined and QA measures undertaken for OLEs will be examined. The scope will narrow to a critical analysis of literature pertaining to the role of the online instructor in quality and QA, specifically the use of QA rubrics, establishing teaching presence, and overall preparedness. Second, a critical examination of the literature pertaining to emotions in learning, emotionally safe OLEs, and the role of the online instructor in creating and facilitating emotionally safe OLEs will follow. Finally, identity will be defined and the role of the instructor in identity expression within OLEs explored. The literature reviewed in this chapter will be foundational to this research study and the findings presented in Chapter 4. This literature review will elucidate an opportunity to expand the notion of quality learning within HE OLEs to include emotional safety and identity expression as well as reaffirm the meaningful role that online instructors play in creating and facilitating safe OLEs.

### **2.2 Sources of Literature**

In the initial stages of research, a wide net was cast for collecting and analysing research pertaining to quality in OLEs, emotions in learning, identity formation and identity expression. Research initially came from numerous fields such as neuroscience, behavioural psychology, sociology, educational research, and anthropology. I felt the wider scope proved beneficial as it

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underscored the complexities and interdisciplinary nature of these topics. The foremost sources of research analysed stemmed from peer reviewed journals, books, and articles online published by educators about their reflective and scholarly teaching practices in teaching online. My approach to culling was to ensure balance in viewpoints, inclusion of a variety of sources, as well as ensure all sources aligned within the topic areas and research questions. From this wide cast net, the scope was then purposefully narrowed down to fields of behavioural psychology and educational research thus remaining within my area of expertise as well fulfilling an obligation to conduct research within educational research.

### **2.3. Quality in OLEs**

This section will define quality learning and explore how quality in learning is measured and assured at HEIs in Canada. The topics of emotional safety and identity expression will be examined in subsequent sections (see sections 2.3 and 2.4).

#### **2.3.1 Quality Learning Defined**

Quality learning within HE, specifically OLEs, needs defining, measuring, and assuring. Having a decentralised education system in Canada, whereby provinces and territories possess responsibility for education and thus the quality of learning, means that there is lack of a national initiative or mandate to ensure consistency in quality learning across HEIs in Canada. Quality in learning is important, however, to HEIs in Canada, as evidenced by its

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integration into many strategic plans and policies. Some of the initiatives trying to address issues of quality in education are worth noting.

At the national level, two Pan-Canadian initiatives are seeking to bring together HEIs on issues around quality learning: the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) (Weinrib & Jones, 2014). At the provincial level, initiatives on quality have been led by such as organizations as the Campus Alberta Quality Council (CAQC) and British Columbia's Degree Quality Assessment Board (DQAB). Similarly, at the HE institutional level, many quality initiatives are being undertaken in Canada. For instance, the Ontario Universities Council of Quality Assurance (OUCQA) oversees all QA processes of its members and aids in the quality enhancement of programming.<sup>2</sup> Weinrib and Jones asserted, however, that these initiatives will no longer be sufficient as demands continue to mount from learner groups, degree provision from more colleges, increased numbers of international students, and pressures from the federal government to increase international student enrolment. "These types of changes...will continue to put pressure on governments and universities alike to address the demand for 'quality' in an era of increased global competition and public accountability" (Weinrib & Jones, 2014, p. 235). Quality learning is being addressed in various ways across Canada at various levels

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<sup>2</sup> OUCQA - <https://oucqa.ca/what-we-do/what-we-do-in-quality-assurance/>

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but may fall short with the rise of new challenges and internationalization of education.

Compounding the emerging reality that these initiatives may be insufficient when juxtaposed against emerging education and quality demands, there is also lack of consensus in Canada on how to assure quality learning in HE. There can be many reasons for why this is true. Defining and thus assuring quality learning is critical, as it can better support instructor retention, positively impact the HEI's overall reputation, increase learner satisfaction, help meet learner outcomes, and boost the number of satisfied stakeholders (Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen, & Yeh, 2008). Demonstrating quality learning is also necessary for HEIs to remain relevant and competitive (Prakash, 2018). Quality learning produces graduates who can demonstrate higher levels of learning capacity: "high-quality learning will lead students either to acquire a number of knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Haryono, Budisantoso, Subkhan, & Utanto, 2018, p. 1).

Perhaps not surprisingly, providing a definition of quality learning has proven tenuous (Newton, 2010; Prakash, 2018; Ryan, 2015; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003, 2005, 2007). "Undoubtedly, defining quality continues to be difficult, with some asserting that quality can neither be defined nor quantified and others asserting that quality is subjective and dependent upon individual perspectives" (Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, & Crawford, 2015, p. 3).

Common challenges to defining quality include its elusive and multidimensional nature and the number of stakeholders involved (Schindler

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et al., 2015). It can also be prospective, retrospective, or viewed differently depending on the stakeholder (Biggs, 2001; Prakash, 2018).

For this research study, the following definition was chosen because of its comprehensiveness, focus on learning, and division of education from administration foci. Quality learning is thus:

fitness for purpose, value for money, perfection, transformation, and distinctiveness...it is categorised in terms of educational quality and administrative quality. Educational quality pertains to teaching processes and stakeholder perceptions. Administrative quality concerns infrastructure and administrative processes. To fulfil their social role, HEIs must provide an excellent, valuable, and affordable education. (Prakash, 2018, p. 732)

Furthermore, and importantly, quality learning has "political dimensions and is about more than satisfaction" (Harvey & Williams, 2010, p. 7). Quality learning in a decentralised Canadian system needs to be defined at each HEI and stakeholders need to adopt and understand that it is more than satisfaction. Quality learning can be transformative to the lives and experiences of HE learners.

### **2.3.2 Quality Assurance**

Quality learning in HE can be assured through varied processes, strategies, and measures (e.g., external validation, accreditation, audit, and evaluation).

Quality assurance has two functions in HE: to establish the legitimacy of programming and provide pertinent information to stakeholders about the programming (Kinser, 2014). Typically, widely held QA measures in HE learning focus on instructional design, technology integration and training, revisions, and receiving and addressing stakeholder feedback. QA measures

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can increase pressure to demonstrate accountability, improve learning outcomes, better align achievement levels with occupations, foster a culture of continuous program improvement, increase participant mobility, and enhance program capacity (Essential Skills Ontario, 2014). For these reasons, QA becomes essential component when striving towards quality learning.

Quality assurance and the process of assuring quality in learning can also be viewed as stifling to innovation, overly bureaucratic, hyper focused on assessments, and restrictive to teaching and pedagogically based practices, or even supportive of hierarchies and patterns of exclusion in curriculum development processes (Brady & Bates, 2016; Gibbs & Iacovidou, 2004; Kinser, 2014). Taking all of that into account, the aim of achieving quality learning in HE should still be sought, as the benefits will outweigh the perceived shortcomings.

Worth noting are some QA measures by means of frameworks that some Canadian HEIs using to assess their programming. Curriculum reviews, ideally in a collaborative team-based approach, is employed by some Canadian HEIs to assure quality of their programming (Locke, Hill & Dyjur, 2018). The University of British Columbia (UBC) utilises their in-house-developed Planning, Design/Development, Production, Implementation, and

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Evaluation framework<sup>3</sup> (PDPIE) for designing what they deem quality online programming (Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1 UBC's PDPIE framework for quality assurance.

The PDPIE is a detailed, impressive framework for QA that is built around established pedagogical practices and theories in course design and evaluation. It could be easily adapted by other Canadian HEIs, but is not universally applicable to all, especially smaller colleges or technical institutes in Canada that lack dedicated instructional designers or multimedia

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<sup>3</sup> UBC PDPIE framework for QA:  
<https://instructionaldesign.ubc.ca/resources/designing-for-a-quality-online-course/>



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developers. This framework would be enhanced if it included aspects of quality facilitation of the OLE, rather than just design aspects.

The Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (OUCQA) has developed the *Quality Assurance Framework and Guide* (2019) for its members. The document provides protocols for new program approvals, expedited approvals, cyclical review of existing programs, and audit processes. Clear protocols are important for the participating members to follow to ensure that quality is ubiquitous, but again, this framework is unique to Ontario and only to members of this council. To better support all HEIs in Canada, a plausible solution would be to move towards a more comprehensive, nationally recognised QA framework.

There is growing momentum towards developing a common QA framework for HE outside of Canada, especially given the internationalization and competition of HE OLEs in recent years, increased demand, and greater variety of HEIs and private sector institutions (Holt et al., 2013; Kinser, 2014; Ryan, 2015; Steinhardt, Schneijderberg, Götze, Baumann, & Krücken, 2017).

"A common framework for a quality assurance model would provide consistent assessment of learning design, content, and pedagogy" (Ryan, 2015, p. 2).

One such comprehensive framework exists that could be certainly used as a jumping-off point. The Schindler et al. (2015) conceptual framework of QA (Figure 2.2) is comprehensive in scope and scholarly in design and could easily be augmented or adapted to meet the unique needs of HEIs in Canada.



Figure 2.2 Conceptual Model of Quality Learning (Schindler et al., 2015, p. 7).

Schindler et al.'s (2015) conceptual framework (model) was constructed after a meta-analysis of educational research pertaining to quality learning in HE.

The inner circle of Figure 2.2 shows the four broad conceptualizations of quality that comprise the middle portion of this framework: purposeful, exceptional, transformative, and accountable. *Purposeful* refers to institutional products and services that "conform to a stated mission/vision or set of specifications, requirements, or standards, including those defined by accrediting and/or regulatory bodies" (Schindler et al., 2015, p. 5), while *exceptional* refers to those products and services that "achieve distinction and exclusivity through the fulfilment of high standards" (Schindler et al., 2015, p. 5). *Transformative* means to "effect positive change in student learning and personal and professional potential" (Schindler et al., 2015, p. 5), while

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*accountable* refers to how the HEI is accountable to stakeholders "for optimal use of resources and the delivery of accurate educational products and services with zero defects" (Schindler et al., 2015, p. 5). The outer circle constitutes quality indicators whose role is to assess the four inner circle conceptualizations. The transformative section of this framework is an ideal area in which to include aspects of emotions in learning, emotional safety, and identity expression, as will be discussed in later sections.

Both stakeholders and the concept of quality are central to all aspects of this framework. Schindler et al. (2015) detailed four groups of stakeholders: "providers (e.g., funding bodies, the community, taxpayers); users of products (e.g., learners); users of outputs (e.g., future employers); and employees of the sector (e.g., academics, instructors, and administrators)" (p. 4). Arguably, all four groups have a vested interest in and perspective on success and QA of OLEs at their respective HEI.

Schindler et al.'s (2015) framework represents current thinking and research and could be utilised for designing and assuring quality OLEs. It is broad enough to allow for growth and refinement. This framework could also be used by educational researchers when contextualising or initiating new research investigations pertaining to OLEs. Some areas that could be added under the refinement of this framework are emotional safety, identity expression, integration of technologies into OLEs, faculty selection and qualifications, educational development, and retention of faculty (Blieck et al., 2018; Contact North, 2013; Rovai & Downey, 2010). Another refinement would be to add the word *learning* to the word *quality* at the centre of the framework to read *quality learning*

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*learning*. Learning should be central to any QA process or framework in HE (Tezcan-Unal, Winston, & Qualter, 2018).

A QA process at an HEI requires a dynamic and robust tracking and management system. Bates (2018) argued that Canadian HEIs were not properly tracking online learning development. Tracking of OLE development is imperative because, as Bates reasoned, it allows HEIs to understand its online learning growth, helps reduce redundancies, and fosters opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. Markova, Glazkova and Zaborova (2017) would add that tracking OLE also helps ensure the quality of OLEs. HEIs "need to evolve towards a process of continuous quality improvement instead of relying on standards set at a macro level" (Blieck et al., 2018, p. 4).

A QA management system requires continuous reporting to various stakeholders from a committed leadership team and allocation of funds within operating budgets.

The leadership of quality OLEs is becoming more complex and demanding as we see the growing size, diversity, and reach of universities...with the growing number of information and communications technologies (ICTs) which constitute such environments, with the loosening of institutional control over certain technologies which can be used for effective learning and teaching, with the greater size and more diverse composition of universities' workforces and student populations, and the ever-present multiplicity of curricular and pedagogical models which underlie an ever-expanding range of occupations and professions requiring higher level education. Added to these complexities and demands is the intensifying national and international competition in the e-learning marketplace, now involving the formation of competitive alliances and partnerships with global reach. No one formal leader at the top, no matter how ambitious and knowledgeable, could possibly contend with the complexity of issues related to the quality management of OLEs. Leaders must be mobilized down, across, and throughout the organisation to realise the

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full benefits of massive institutional investments in online learning systems. (Holt et al., 2013, p. 389)

Designing and delivering quality OLEs in HE is necessary and becoming increasingly complex given a rapidly evolving global education e-marketplace. To achieve quality learning in OLEs, HEIs require a dedicated leadership team consisting of all stakeholders, especially HE instructors and learners, dedicated resources, and a dynamic management system. Many of the existing tools or frameworks (e.g., PDPIE) could easily be adopted by HEIs and instructors in Canada to design quality OLEs. Schindler et al.'s (2015) framework is wider in scope and could be a basis for Canadian HEIs to find national consensus on issues pertaining to quality in learning to become more globally competitive.

### **2.3.3 Role of the Instructor**

Of the many ways instructors could ensure quality learning within their OLE, this section will highlight just three: including the use of a QA rubric for course design and evaluation, establishing teaching presence, and being fully prepared to facilitate and teach within an OLE.

#### **2.3.3.1 QA Rubric**

There are many QA rubrics that HE instructors could use to ensure quality of learning with their OLEs. The Quality Matters (QM) Rubric is an internationally recognised QA measure with a simple point system (see Appendix). Although its scope is limited to course design, the areas it addresses are far-reaching and widely regarded as valid within instructional design and teaching

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communities (Kearns & Mancilla, 2017; Legon, 2015; Loafman & Altman, 2014). This rubric was developed primarily for a North American HE population and should be adapted for different HEIs, languages, and/or cultures (Gao & Legon, 2015). Using a QA rubric is one way in which HE instructors can better ensure quality learning with their OLEs. However, not all HE instructors have control or editorial licence over the OLE design. In this instance, this rubric may be used by the HE instructor to initiate conversations on quality learning and assurance with other stakeholders at the HEI.

### **2.3.3.2 Teaching Presence**

Teaching presence is another way HE instructors can assure quality learning within their OLE (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Included in teaching presence are the design, facilitation, and direction of the entire set of cognitive and social processes within the OLE (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010; Picciano, 2002). Teaching presence provides a critical bridge between learners and instructors and is linked with higher-order thinking (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Garrison et al., 2010; Meyer, 2003), the establishment of online learning communities (Shea, Sau Li, & Pickett, 2006) and to learner engagement. "Teaching presence not only impacts learners' perception about learning and socialization in the online learning community but also impacts learners' overt engagement behaviors" (Zhang, Lin, Zhan, & Ren, 2016, p. 897). Teaching presence via instructor communication, organization, and clarity of course design was a significant factor in online learner satisfaction (Brooks & Young, 2015). Teaching

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presence within OLEs is also crucial in facilitating and moderating online discussion forums.

Teaching presence is not without criticism and has been modified since its inception (Xin, 2012). Armellini and De Stefani (2016) suggested that social presence should be more prominent compared to teaching and cognitive presences. Garrison (2012), an originating author, suggested that teaching presence "must be viewed as a means to study collaborative constructivist educational transactions – be they in online, blended, or face-to-face environments" (para. 5). That said, teaching presence within an HE OLE is a valuable component of quality and critical to the establishment of online learning communities and learner engagement.

Learner satisfaction of high achievers has been linked to "the amount and quality of faculty's interaction and support they receive during the course" (Owston, York, & Murtha, 2013, p. 43). Even though Owston et al.'s study focused on blended learning and not OLEs, it highlighted the question of suitability of certain learning environments to different types of achievers. They found that low-achieving learners preferred traditional styles of learning and a lecture style of instruction, speculating that perhaps this group of learners favoured more structure and supervision than their high-achieving counterparts. The high achievers favoured more teaching presence and were more adaptable to different learning environments and teaching styles. The question of suitability of learning environments and adaptation to teaching styles in both low and high achieving learners is interesting. Perhaps not all OLEs are suitable to all learners nor are all teaching strategies. This would

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certainly have an impact, at least in the learners' mind, to quality and satisfaction within an OLE.

### **2.3.3.3 Instructor Preparedness**

Instructor preparedness could be viewed as an offshoot of teaching presence, but I separated it because I feel it pertains more to the preparation of the OLE than to facilitation or establishing presence within the OLE. Instructor preparedness requires time, resources, training, and support. For an instructor to feel comfortable and competent facilitating within an OLE, often new teaching strategies, technology skills, and adaptation of content are needed. Instructor preparedness is, however, a key challenge facing Canadian HEIs (Contact North, 2015): "The capacity of faculty to engage in learning design and fully integrate both ICT [Information and Communication Technologies] and OER [Open Educational Resources] into their work is limited by their experience, the conditions of practice, and available resources" (p. 5). These factors are often well outside the control of HE instructors, as was the case for many of the WCC instructors I interviewed and who had been assigned their OLE just before the course began. Such an abrupt start to online teaching can leave instructors feeling disheartened and the overall experience challenging (Schmidt, Hodge, & Tschida, 2013). The preparedness of instructors to teach online is imperative to overall quality, to establishing teaching presence, and to learner satisfaction, so it must be considered by any quality leadership team.



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Solutions to challenges such as the ones just described are complex. Often, significant investment into educational development of HE instructors is needed but not always feasible. At a minimum, HEIs can initiate conversations around instructor preparedness, training, and support, especially in lieu of how instructor preparedness and feeling supported connects. These types of conversations can foster a quality learning culture at the HEI and with instructors. Educational development, training, and support are not always available or customizable, but conversations can bring awareness, as self-efficacy towards teaching online is linked to the ability of instructors to overcome negative expectations and experiences.

Such training and support would need to address the concerns professors have about student learning as well as technical concerns about computer use in online instructional practices. Faculty training could also more transparently address their self-efficacy related to online teaching. (Horvitz, Beach, Anderson, & Xia, 2015, p. 314)

Quality in HE learning is complex and difficult to define. There are many QA measures in use at many HEIs that attempt to address aspects of quality, especially in instructional design and evaluation. Many stakeholders are involved in assuring quality of learning and resources. The Schindler et al. (2015) conceptual model of QA is comprehensive and evidentiary designed and could be augmented to include emotional safety, identity expression, and teaching presence. The reasons as to why emotional safety and identity expression are important to OLEs in HE will be detailed in the following two sections.

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## 2.4 Emotionally Safe OLEs

Ensuring an emotionally safe OLE and understanding emotions in learning are critical for both learners and instructors, a component of quality learning, and part of complex learning and cognitive performance (Pekrun, Vogl, Muis, & Sinatra, 2017). This section will first explore emotions in learning to provide greater understanding of how emotions and learning are interconnected and how, like identity, they should not be overlooked or trivialised. It will then examine what an emotionally safe OLE looks like within HE. It will conclude with an overview of the role of the instructor in creating and maintaining an emotionally safe OLE.

### 2.4.1 Emotions in Learning

To better understand emotional safety within OLEs, *emotions in learning* needs to be defined and explored. Emotions consume the entirety of the body, including affective, cognitive, physiological, motivational, and expressive components (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014a). The relationship between cognition and emotion is bidirectional, meaning that cognition and emotion function in two directions and it is therefore necessary to better understand both (Fiedler & Beier, 2014).

Emotions are experienced within a setting such as an OLE and are "discursive practices operating in circumstances that grant powers to some relations and delimit the powers of others, that enable some to create truth and others to submit to it, that allow some to judge and others to be judged" (Zembylas, 2003, p. 115). This power imbalance and potentially judgemental learning

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environment is important to understand when designing and facilitating OLEs and it speaks to the importance of the role of the instructor.

Emotions involved in the process of cognition and knowledge generation, like confusion, surprise, or curiosity, are referred to as epistemic emotions, which are situation-specific and driven primarily by cognitive incongruity (Arguel, Lockyer, Kennedy, Lodge, & Pachman, 2019; Pekrun & Stevens, 2012; Pekrun et al., 2017; Vogl, Pekrun, Murayama, & Loderer, 2019). Typically, the primary learning-centred emotions seen in learning are "confusion, frustration, boredom, and engagement/flow, with occasional moments of curiosity, happiness, delight and surprise, and anxiety when students are preparing for tests" (Graesser, D'Mello, & Strain, 2014, p. 488). Emotions are ever-present in learning, but emotions influence cognition differently and are not all relevant (Vogl et al., 2019). Emotions are, however, important to understand as they are linked with and act as a propellant for academic achievement, motivation, performance, identity development, personal growth, and overall wellbeing; however, they can negatively impact achieving learning outcomes, success, and experience (Ainley, 2008; Arguel et al., 2019; Artino, 2012; Jackson, 2010; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014a; Pekrun & Stephens, 2010; Schutz & Pekrun, 2007; Zembylas, 2003).

Emotions are considered subjective, so what a learner feels can only be known to that learner (Shuman, Sander, & Scherer, 2013). Culture, age, and gender are also factors when experiencing emotions in learning. This is evident in how some learners prepare for testing or experience test anxiety, how they express emotions, how they are in instructor-learner relationships

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and communications, and how they respond to verbal and nonverbal cues (DeCuir-Gunby & Williams-Johnson, 2014). Male learners tend to demonstrate higher instances of negative emotions and a higher emotional arousal (Schweder & Raufelder, 2019) and female learners tend to be more receptive to accepting tutorial assistance (Arroyo, Burtleson, Tai, Muldner, & Woolf, 2013).

There are two dimensions of emotions referred to in the literature: valence (pleasant states) and activation (positive activating, negative activating, or negative deactivating) (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014a Pekrun & Stephens, 2010). In other words, emotions can be present in one's current state or emotions can be activated. An example of positive activation is enjoyment, an example of negative activation is anxiety, and one of negative deactivating is boredom (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014a). This is important, as "negative affective cues and moods support accommodation, whereas positive affect supports assimilation functions" (Fiedler & Beier, 2014, p. 39).

There are four groups of emotions: achievement emotions (i.e., academic activities leading to success or failure), topic emotions (triggered by content), epistemic emotions (cognitive qualities of task information and processing), and social emotions (emotions related to people in learning) (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014a). This is an important distinction, especially when encountering emotion within an OLE for intervention and motivational strategies. Finding the source of the emotion may help in selecting activation or deactivation techniques or interventions. Emotions will transition during

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cognitive disequilibrium depending on the difficulty of the learning task (Graesser et al., 2014).

Emotions are emoted from everyone involved in the learning process (i.e., from learners to instructors to support personnel) and are vital to the relationships between and among these individuals (Quinlan, 2016). Fiedler and Beier (2014) suggested that an educational setting such as an OLE is "replete with experiences, anxiety, and fun, frustration, and fulfilment, disappointment, and pride" (p. 36). For this research study, fear and anxiety, along with their antonym counterparts, were chosen as they are most related to the area of emotional safety. "Anxiety can comprise uneasy and tense feelings (affective), worries (cognitive), impulses to escape from the situation (motivational), and peripheral activation (physiological)" (Pekrun, Goetz, Frenzel, Barchfeld, & Perry, 2011, p. 37).

#### **2.4.2 Emotionally Safe OLEs**

"Psychological safety can be regarded as a psychological climate: a property of individuals denoting their perception of the psychological impact that the work or study environment has on his or her personal wellbeing" (Schepers, de Jong, Wetzels, & de Ruyter, 2008, p. 760). Psychological, or emotional safety, is positively associated with goal achievement, personal engagement, motivation, and lessened anxiety (Schepers et al., 2008).

Fear can have an object (and can dissipate rapidly) but is most intense when it has no object (Bauman, 2006). Anxiety is complex and has no object; rather, it involves enduring trepidations. "Anxiety gathers cognitive, affective, somatic

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arousal, and behavioural components together to respond to and/or anticipate future threats or dangers in the environment or general misfortunes" (Zeidner, 2014, p. 266).

Anxiety is typically higher in females and in minority groups (Zeidner, 2014). According to Zeidner, within an educational context, anxiety can be seen most often as test anxiety, math anxiety, technology anxiety, social anxiety, or second-language anxiety. High levels of anxiety are detrimental to learners' wellbeing and academic achievement.

Thus, high levels of anxiety, accompanied by elevated levels of worry and cognitive interference, absorb part of the capacity needed for attention, working memory, problem solving, or other cognitive processes required for successful completion of a task. Evaluative anxiety also produces avoidant patterns of motivation, coping, and task strategies that interfere with learning and performance. The result is that competence and self-efficacy suffers, thus leading to further anxiety over time, and generating a vicious circle of increasing anxiety and degrading competence for students. (Zeidner, 2014, p. 284)

Fear can manifest as fear of academic failure (Jackson, 2010, 2018) or distrust (Bewsell, 2012). These types of fears propagate feelings of vulnerability, risk, suspicion, doubt, lack of confidence, or uneasiness; in other words, they are the antithesis of feeling safe (Bewsell, 2012). Fear in instructors can manifest from attitudes towards online teaching or having to acquire new skill sets (Kukulska-Hulme, 2012; Smidt, McDyre, Bunk, Li, & Gatenby, 2014). Fear of change is an established stressor for instructors.

These emotions can be mitigated by raising awareness and receiving timely, targeted support. Increasing technological self-efficacy and digital competence may also curtail some fears and anxieties (Cantabrana, Rodriguez & Cervera,

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2019; Wingo, Ivankova, & Moss, 2017). Instructors who endeavour to teach more online and embrace change alleviate some of their fears and anxieties about teaching online (Floyd & Preston, 2018; Smidt et al., 2014).

Faculty, who are both the recipients and agents of change, must be open to online education to increase the likelihood of its successful implementation. Faculty are initially the recipients of the change as the decision to adapt online education is often initiated by administrators in the institution. While change agents (e.g., deans, department chairs, or program directors) may initiate the shift to an online format, the faculty, both individually and as a collective entity, have the power to fight or embrace the change. (Mitchell, Parlamis, & Claiborne, 2015, p. 384)

For learners, some anxiety and fear can be abated by completing an evidence-based online learning orientation (Abdous, 2019), having early access to course materials, by a pleasantly toned greeting by an instructor, or through continuous teaching presence within the OLE (Conrad, 2002). Further support strategies can be implemented for test, technology, and second language anxieties.

Feeling safe implies a diminishing manifestation or even absence of fears and anxieties. "I feel safe" typically refers to physical safety, but it can also refer to emotional safety. The National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments defined emotional safety as "an experience in which one feels safe to express emotions, security, and confidence to take risks and feel challenged and excited to try something new" (The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2019, para 1). I chose this definition because it adds security and confidence to emotions as well as positively frames an experience (as opposed to a negatively framed experience with fear or anxiety).

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There can be two levels of emotional safety: level of negative emotions, as evident by emotions of fear and anxiety, and level of positive emotions, as evident by emotions of pleasure (Bogolyubova & Kiseleva, 2016). An emotionally unsafe learning environment can foster negative emotions while a positive, emotionally safe learning environment can lead learners to an overall positive experience.

Wang, Wu, and Huang (2018) presented three types of emotional safety needs: the need to love and be loved, the need for self-perfection of safety humanity (need for perfection), and the need for realising self-value to safety. These three types are simplistic in the complex area of emotional safety, but they do raise an interesting point that individual emotional needs trigger a behavioural response. If emotional needs are not met, negative behavioural responses occur. When considering an OLE, fostering a culture valuing emotionally safety wherein the emotional needs of the instructor and the learners are met could, in theory, trigger positive behavioural responses, resulting in a myriad of possibilities, like transformation learning.

Callan (2016) offered the term "dignity safety" which I found to be a fascinating conceptualization, especially juxtaposed with emotional safety. "To be dignity safe in a given social environment is to be free of any reasonable anxiety that others will treat one as having an inferior social rank to theirs" (Callan, 2016, p. 65). According to Callan, a social group is dignity safe "if its members can participate without reasonable worries that they are likely to be humiliated by others" (2016, p. 67).



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"Dignity safety" is intended instead to designate a condition of warranted trust in the respect of others with whom one shares a given social space, a trust sufficient to put to rest the worries a reasonable person might have about their vulnerability to a particular kind of wrong in a less benign environment. The value at stake here is not something to be maximized; it is rather a threshold condition that will ordinarily be taken for granted when people are secure in the knowledge that others can be relied on to treat them as equals, even when disagreement or conflict arises. (Callan, 2016, p. 68)

I include dignity safety as it encapsulates components of what emotional safety within OLEs in HE ought to be centred around: respect, trust, and equality. An OLE should be a place free of humiliation and a space to express oneself and one's identity. Emotional safety is the cornerstone of QA within OLEs, especially as many OLEs are without visual cues or representations and based solely on written text. Trust, respect, and equality need to underpin social interactions and cooperative learning initiatives.

Next, I will explore identity, its expression in OLEs, and the complexities of self-disclosure. I will introduce a model of identity that will be used throughout the remainder of this study.

### **2.4.3 Role of the Instructor**

The role of the instructor in terms of emotions in learning and emotionally safe OLEs is complex as roles differ vastly across HE and within OLEs. There are, however, some recommendations for HE instructors teaching in OLES that can be culled from the research. The HE online instructor can play a critical role in ensuring a safe and creative space (Tezcan-Unal et al., 2018). In terms of emotions in learning, instructors should "pay close attention to learners' epistemic emotions to foster their self-regulated knowledge generation" (Vogl

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et al., 2019, p. 15). "Teaching and learning practices which foster both cooperation and competition, independence and self-evaluation, can build the strength of students' voices in ways that do not deny learners' self-identity and values" (Ingleton, 1995, pp. 333-334).

Not all HE instructors design their own course, but for the ones that do, course design needs to consider acknowledging emotions in learning (e.g., confusion) and prepare accordingly targeted interventions, feedback, and support (Arguel et al., 2019).

## **2.5 Identity Expression in OLEs**

Emotions and identity are linked; identity expression can be a natural transition from having emotions in learning. "The very identification of one's emotions and experiences – however one wishes to define emotions – depends on the identity of the person whose emotions and experiences they are" (Zembylas, 2003, p. 111). This section will explore the definition of identity as well as examine literature pertaining to identity expression within online learning environments.

### **2.5.1 Identity Within the Literature**

Identity seeks to answer the question, "Who am I?" While this is a seemingly simple question, answering it has been riddled with debate and scientific approaches. Scholarly discourse within identity studies, or research studies pertaining to identity within various academic fields, continues over conceptually and articulately defining identity.

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Identity Studies is at the tipping point where, if this [development of a common taxonomy] is not done, the field will simply become another area in which a commonly used term has virtually no shared, precise meaning or meanings, as in the case of the concept of culture. (Côté, 2006, p. 8)

One plausible explanation for this ongoing discourse is that identity is a complex, multifaceted concept with different frames of reference (Illeris, 2014b).

Identity can be two-dimensional; the overall number of identities an individual has (identity uniqueness) is the first dimension and the overlapping of these identities is the second (Grant & Hogg, 2012). It can be symmetric or asymmetric when memory and anticipation are involved (Sider, 2018).

Depending on the contexts, it can also be plural (Rodogno, 2012).

Online contexts are novel and peculiar insofar as they afford prolonged disembodied and anonymous interaction with others...there is reason to suspect that such contexts generate new and sui generis answers to the personal identity question. (Rodogno, 2012, p. 310)

Perceived anonymity, or feeling anonymous in an online environment, has been used as an instructional strategy in some OLEs to engage in discussions on topics that would not be spoken during a traditional style discussion in a classroom environment.

Identity can be viewed as personal (Illeris 2014a, 2014b), political (Brown & Arriaza Ibarra, 2018), corporate (Flint, Signori, & Golicic, 2018), national (McCrone & Bechhofer, 2010), cultural (Altugan, 2015), or a combination of two or more of these delineations.

Cultural Identity can be defined as individuals nature and nurture which includes their experiences, talents, skills, beliefs, values, and

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knowledge, in other words, who they are, what their status is in their family, school, work, environment, and country, and, beyond that, in the world as with globalization the world is getting smaller. (Altugan, 2015, p. 1160)

Identity can expand into self-image, also known as social identity (Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, & Hendres, 2011). "Emotion and identity are social as much as they are individual" (Zembylas, 2003, p. 112). Self-image is derived in part from social interaction and perceptions.

[The]concept of social identity...refers to those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories or groups to which he or she perceives himself or herself as belonging together with the value and emotional significance attached to that category or group membership. (Bliuc et al., 2011, p.562)

Identity can include aspects of a collective, or group (Eccles, 2009). This group can be homogenous or heterogeneous in nature (Jans, Postmes, & Van der Zee, 2012). The notion of collective identity was further substantiated by a study by Grant and Hogg (2012). In this study, evidence suggested that any individual has the potential to find a sense of identity within an online group, but it seems that individuals who are motivated more towards a group identity than perhaps a self or social identity often present with a high instance of self-uncertainty. Group identity can be important in OLEs, especially within programs that lead to employment within certain fields (e.g., nursing).

Possessing a sense of group identity has been connected to academic engagement and achievement (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2003; Steele, 1997). Learners with high commitment making, identity synthesis, and self-esteem (components of identity formation) presented lower instances of anxiety, depression, and hazardous alcohol use (Hardy & Kisling, 2006). In

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other words, if learners can make commitments and have high levels of personal self-esteem, it may be reasoned that they have lower levels of anxiety and are thus better able to trust and create a more emotionally safe learning environment.

Identity can be genetically determined (Hauskeller, Sturdy, & Tutton, 2013) or influenced by social interactions or certain environments.

There is no single overarching story of genetics and identity. Each of the multiple identities that an individual or group may adopt is shaped in a specific environment characterized by a particular configuration of social and technical resources and structured by particular interests, expectations, and power relations. Identities have a public and a personal side, and are negotiated in the interplay of individuals, others, and institutions that is at once informed by relevant laws, institutions, ideologies, and beliefs, yet necessarily responsive to social change and to the influence and agency of individuals and groups. (Hauskeller et al., 2013, p. 883)

This concise overview of some of the literature within identity studies was conducted to illustrate the complexity and difficulty in defining identity. The process of defining identity, however, "provides people with norms to follow, scripts for behaviours and ways to interpret their actions...and affects a wide range of in-lab and real-world decisions" (Chen, Urminsky, & Bartels, 2016, p. 1398). Thus, the quest for defining identity will continue.

Identity development is continuous over a lifespan, with the most significant formation occurring during adolescence and early adulthood (Fadjukoff & Kroger, 2016; Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010; Topolewska-Siedzik & Ciecuch, 2019). Erikson (1959, 1968, 1970) did a substantial amount of work on ego identity. Erikson's (1968) psychosocial development theory postulated

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that the ego transitions between stages throughout a healthy individual's lifespan. The stages are:

- Stage 1 – Hope: trust versus mistrust (birth - 2 years)
- Stage 2 – Will: autonomy versus shame and doubt (2 - 4 years)
- Stage 3 – Purpose: initiative versus guilt (4 - 5 years)
- Stage 5 – Competence: industry versus inferiority (5 - 12 years)
- Stage 6 – Fidelity: identity versus confusion/diffusion (13 - 19 years)
- Stage 7 – Love: intimacy versus isolation (19 - 39 years)
- Stage 8 – Care: generativity versus stagnation (39 - 64 years)
- Stage 9 – Wisdom: integrity versus despair (64+)

Based on these stages, learners in HE would be positioned in stages 6 to 9 of ego development. The epigenesis of these stages is childhood, but growth and advancement to each following stage continues into adulthood and Stage 8. If an individual is unable, for any reason, to emerge from a stage without suitably navigating presented conflicts, the individual will develop a sense of inadequacy and thus lack a clear sense of personal identity. Erikson (1968) called this an "identity crisis," and it usually occurs during adolescence.

There are factors to consider if a learner is in an identity crisis while in higher education. Without a clear sense of identity, a learner is

at increased risk for several personal and behavioral problems, including academic difficulties and poor peer relations (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2005), low self-esteem and depression (Nurmi, Berzonsky, Tammi, & Kinney, 1997), eating disorders (Wheeler, Adams, & Keating, 2001), drug and alcohol problems (Jones, Ross, & Hartmann, 1992), and conduct disorders (Adams, Munro, Doherty-Poirer, Munro, Petersen, & Edwards, 2001). (Bosch & Card, 2012, pp. 333-334)

Learners presenting with these types of issues are frequently observed in higher education, as counsellors, staff in learner support services, and even instructors can attest (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Ibrahim, Kelly, Adams, &

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Glazebrook, 2012). Again, this illustrates the importance of identity in learning and to learners in HE.

Like any theory, limitations and criticisms exist towards Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory. The dominant criticisms include the lack of clarity surrounding how an individual progresses from one stage to the next, the ambiguous nature of each of the stages' descriptors, how one ought to overcome conflicts within a stage, and whether the theory is applicable to all cultures and to all populations (Sneed, Schwartz, & Cross, 2006). Noting this criticality, Erikson's theory is still considered valid and essential to better understanding how identities are formed.

Marcia (1966, 2002) extended his theory by operationalising the identity versus identity confusion/diffusion stage in adolescence (Bosch & Card, 2012). Marcia (1966) postulated that instead of resolution or confusion, an individual explores and then chooses to commit to an identity. "*Exploration* involves an active search for information about alternative lifestyles, beliefs, and values. *Commitment* involves efforts to decide which possibilities fit best with one's personality and to apply these decisions in a variety of contexts" (Bosch & Card, 2012). Marcia's theory has been applied to diverse population groups and cultures in numerous research studies, making it more palatable and perhaps even transferable to higher education populations (Côté, 2006; Hardy & Kisling, 2006). If an individual can explore and then choose to commit to an identity, then perhaps a learner can explore and choose to commit to a learning identity while in HE.

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Berzonsky (1990) identified three types of identity processing styles: informative, normative, and diffuse-avoidant. These styles are interlinked with values that motivate and direct choices in one's life. Conversations within the literature around what role these identity processing styles play within academic learning exists (e.g. Kaplan & Flum, 2009), but further research is needed. Motivation is a positive emotion and necessary in an emotionally safe OLE and to learner success.

### **2.5.2 Illeris' Structural Model of Identity**

Defining the concept of identity is complex, as demonstrated in the above review of the literature. Identity has many characteristics and is influenced by different factors, such as context or social interactions. I highlighted the most commonly seen characteristics presented within the literature and overviewed the origins of identity formation to provide a foundation for why I selected Illeris' (2014a, 2014b) structural model of identity for this research study. Illeris' model provides a concise definition of identity, interweaves identity with transformational learning, and prominently positions identity centrally within the overall learning process. The transformational learning possible through the Illeris model is a lens by which transformative quality learning in Schindler et al.'s (2015) conceptual model of quality learning (Figure 2.2) can be achieved. When the relationship between identity and learning is better understood, quality learning can be better designed, facilitated, and assured as well as transformational learning witnessed. If assuring transformative quality learning is the goal, then viewing identity and learning conjunctively is one means by which to achieve this goal.



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Identity in this model is comprised of three layers. One, the personality layer, refers to how an individual interacts with others, communities, and groups (Illeris, 2014b). Two, the preference layer, pertains to an individual's routines, reactions, what they say and how they say it, and, important to this research, how they feel (Illeris, 2014b). Three, the core layer, when developed during adolescence, is relatively stable but does change in certain situations and during transformational learning (Illeris, 2014b).

Illeris' (2014a, 2014b) structural model of identity is reflective of a central or personal identity, but he expanded this to include *part-identities*, which are related to one's attitudes and practices (Figure 2.3). A part-identity relating to practices is categorised as work identity, family identity, or the everyday identity (i.e., interest identity) (Illeris, 2014a). Learner identity or instructor identity could also fit here. If relating to attitudes, a part-identity is categorised as national-cultural identity, religious identity, or political identity (Illeris, 2014a).



Figure 2.3: Illeris' transverse identity structure (2014a, p. 76).

Further, it is important that all of these various part-identities are parts of an individual pattern and interaction in which some parts may be closely related, while others are far from each other, and there may also be elements that are more or less in contrast or even in a kind of enmity towards each other.

Furthermore, there will be some elements that are of very great importance to the individual and have a strong position and a large space in the identity, while others may be weak, or absent. (Illeris, 2014a, p. 75)

When answering the question "Who am I?", it may be enough to say that the answer will be complex and layered.

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People's representations of themselves and others are not simply a list of features or social categories. These representations incorporate beliefs about the causal relations among aspects of identity. The answer to the riddle of who people are lies at the nexus of causal connections among their features of identity. (Chen et al., 2016, p. 1405)

Through social interactions, individuals can conjunctively build aspects of their identity through the co-construction of artefacts. One potential example of this is through discussion forums situated within an OLE.

Learning is not only a cognitive and social experience, but also an identity experience. Who we are, what we are able to do, and what we will be, based on what we learn, are constantly challenged when we attend learning situations. (Ligorio, 2010, p. 97)

Learning and identity are intertwined. Identity is complex, social, and changes over the lifespan of an individual. Understanding identity's formation and its evolution will aid in understanding how it materialises and is expressed within OLE.

## **2.6 Summary**

This chapter reviewed definitions of quality and explored QA in HE learning and the role of the instruction to ensuring quality learning within an OLE. It explored Schindler et al.'s (2015) conceptual framework for QA, which is a comprehensive and pedagogically based tool to assist in quality initiatives at HEIs. Emotions in learning and emotionally safe OLEs were also explored as a subset of quality learning and important for transformative learning. The concept of dignity safety was introduced as an encompassing term that includes respect, trust, and equality, all of which are qualities of an emotionally safe OLE.

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The complexities surrounding defining identity was demonstrated with a concise literature review. For the purposes of this study, I eventually adopted and reviewed Illeris' (2014a, 2014b) model of identity. I found that learning and identity are interlinked and identity changes throughout the learning process, which suggests that educational research into learning and learning environments ought to consider the integration of identity and identity expression.

In Chapter 3, I will present my research strategy and design, including case study methodology and qualitative interviewing. I will outline my research paradigms, ethical considerations, and the limitations of my study.

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## **Chapter 3: Research Strategy and Design**

### **3.1 Overview**

Chapter 3 will outline the rationale behind my research strategy and design choices for this study. This chapter will introduce research paradigms, provide an overview of the qualitative methodology employed, detail how the qualitative interviews were designed and piloted, describe the participants, and provide insight to my coding practices. This chapter will conclude by detailing the ethical considerations and limitations of this study.

### **3.2 Research Design Strategy and Methodology**

A research design strategy was designed to aid in the selection of a research methodology (Mason, 2018). In crafting this strategy, I reviewed the stated problem (see section 1.2), research questions (see section 1.3), the theoretical framework (see section 1.4), and the Canadian online learning and WCC contexts (see sections 1.5 and 1.6). I also considered possible data sources (i.e., instructors and learners at WCC), devised a realistic timeline for this study, and considered potential access constraints and ethical considerations to encounter through the duration of this study (Mason, 2018).

Drafting this research strategy assisted in narrowing qualitative research methodologies that would be appropriate. Considering that the participants would be both HE online learners and instructors from the same Canadian HEI, a single-site qualitative methodology was chosen. Single-site analysis functions as contextual social research, meaning that it seeks to describe what exists at a current site (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2014).

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Although not as common as other types of qualitative methodologies within educational research, single-site research can be used to

describe and display phenomena as experienced by the study population, in fine-tuned detail and in the study participant's own terms. It therefore offers the opportunity to 'unpack' issues, to see what they are about or what lies inside, and to explore how they are understood by those connected with them. (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2013, p. 31)

As with all qualitative research methodologies, criticisms persist. During the research strategy design phase, I tried to address these criticisms and deeply considered issues such as validity and generalizability. I contend that my research is valid, as I observed, identified, and measured what I said I would (Mason, 2018). Perhaps this is a simplistic view of validity, but the notion that validity is obtained by the act of following through from a research design strategy to methodology in a consistent and open manner seemed reasonable.

Likewise, generalizability "involves the extent to which you can make some form of wider claim on the basis of your research and analysis, rather than simply stating that your analysis is entirely idiosyncratic and particular" (Mason, 2018, p. 35). Because this research project is at a single site, with a unique set of online learners and instructors, it would be challenging or even inadvisable to generalise findings from this study. The aim here was to accurately portray and critically analyse the data.

Analogous to QA in learning, researchers in qualitative research lack consensus on how to assure quality of qualitative research practices (Reynolds et al., 2011). Some practices are more commonly employed by

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researchers, including critical and reflexive practices (Mason, 2018) and contribution, clarity, and citizenship (ethics and replication) (Nielson, 2011).

Mason (2018) challenged researchers to ask themselves whether their methods were appropriate and their research carried out carefully and accurately, as well as whether they can demonstrate all of this to readers.

These guiding questions were integrated into my research design strategy and proved vital in the selection of my methodology.

### **3.3 Research Paradigm**

The personal biases, research interests, and identity entering this research investigation influenced the research strategy and design as well as my approach to data analysis and interpretation. Explicitly stating these biases and understanding the assumptions associated with them should assist readers to better contextualise and critique my findings.

No lens is free of bias; every lens has subjective and objective qualities. In presenting your reflective self, the goal is to identify as many of your lens's qualities in as revealing a way as possible. The goal is to provide the audience with sufficient information that it can make its own assessment of the potential (desirable and undesirable) effects of your lens. (Yin, 2011, p. 270)

To identify my research biases, I will detail three assumptions, or research paradigms, as well as my methodology: ontological (the nature of reality), epistemology (what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified), and axiology (the roles of values in research) (Creswell, 2013).

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### **3.3.1. Ontological Perspective**

My ontological perspective is derived from how I view the nature, character, and essence of being within a social world that is comprised of unique lived experiences and interactions with others (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mason, 2018). There are social scientific ontological elements that help constitute what this social world is and reflecting upon many of them aided in the articulation of my ontological perspective. Some of the elements I reflected upon were people, emotion, understanding, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, values, truth, technologies, social practices, words, culture, stories, and institutions.

The ontological perspective that influenced my research design is that there is no one universal reality that exists that is true for all. Everyone experiences life differently and has different social interactions, challenges, and opportunities. If numerous realities exist, then these realities could be better understood in learning environments. Learners have differing realities from other learners and instructors, while instructors have different realities from other instructors and their learners. How online learners view emotional safety and identity expression within online learning environments will differ from the view of instructors who teach and facilitate these courses to their classroom peers in the same course. Capturing and understanding as many realities as possible will thus assist in developing a more holistic representation of viewpoints.



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### **3.3.2 Epistemological Position**

My epistemological assumptions towards the nature and theory of knowledge and how it is acquired in this social world were drawn from various philosophical approaches (e.g., objectivism) (Inhelder, 1958). Assumptions can be assembled into an epistemological position. For this research study, my epistemological position is most closely aligned with post-modernism and social constructivism: "There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed" (Crotty, 1998, pp. 8-9). Post-modern views towards how knowledge is derived "mounts a challenge to the authority of established rational theories and their claims to 'truth' and expertise, disputes the idea that there is one truth or reality" (Mason, 2018, p. 9).

An online learner resides within a social world, has a unique mind that constructs a meaning of self (identity) throughout their lifetime, and derives meaning acquired from knowledge. Approaching this research study with the view that meaning and identity can be socially constructed also aided in the design of the research and interview questions.

### **3.3.3 Axiological Assumptions**

My axiological assumptions, or my values and biases, formed as I worked in my various roles at WCC. My values are broad-ranging and evolved as began to fully appreciate that teaching is complex and nuanced and that instructional design ought to be an inclusionary process with instructors and learners. Critical reflection became routine as did the integration of evidence-based teaching, design, and learning strategies.

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I believe that the tenets of transformative learning can be achieved through paradigm shifts in viewpoint, identity, and values (Calleja, 2014; Cranton, 2005; Mezirow, 1990, 1991). Teaching and learning need to include room for one's voice as well as room for independent growth and autonomy. No one-size-fits-all approach fits every situation, lending more credence to universal design strategies and the need for flexibility.

Identity, with its ongoing metamorphosis and its expression within formal learning environments, is also dynamic and complex. Not everyone defines, understands, or necessarily values their identity in the same manner. Identity may be interesting and valued by the researcher, but not necessarily by the participants. An HE learner may or may not identify as "being a learner" and an instructor may or may not identify as "being a teacher." This results in the requirement to identify several viewpoints and perspectives from both learners and instructors and for the participants to articulate their own truths, values, and definition of identity. For this study, it was not as important to find commonality between participants as to discover and capture those perspectives and expressions.

### **3.4 Ethical Considerations**

During the research design and strategy stage, I tried to anticipate possible ethical considerations that could arise, then considered ways to appropriately address them. This process was guided by the work of Mason (2018), who argued that ethics "is grounded, situated, and incorporates epistemological ethics, whilst existing in the real world of ethical regulation and negotiating its

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constraints and hurdles" (p. 104). The ethical considerations I foresaw in this study included the optics of interviewing close colleagues; potential power dynamics when interviewing WCC learners; ethics stemming from my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions; who would be involved in this research; what impact my findings may have; participants over-sharing or giving incriminating information; and the ethical considerations that would stem from qualitative interviewing and organising and analysing the generated data.

I obtained formal ethics reviews from both Lancaster University and Western Canadian College. Due to the potentially sensitive aspects of sharing around safety and identity, additional confidentiality measures were created and reviewed individually with each participant, including the assignment of pseudonyms to participants and to the college. The generated data was kept secure in my locked laptop within a password-protected folder. All paper and field notes were stored in a folder inside my locked cabinet. All release forms were signed and securely stored. My role at WCC was clearly detailed in the consent forms.

Ultimately, no major ethical issues arose in this study or during the qualitative interview process. When sensitive information was shared, the participants seemed satisfied in the anonymity measures that were in place. I also emphasised that this was doctoral research with Lancaster University and provided participants with my personal email address to use for communication instead of my WCC work email address. Participants were also given time after the interview to withdraw from the study, with no penalty,

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and to review their own transcript. None of my immediate work colleagues were interviewed for this study nor were any of my former learners interviewed. Some of the instructors I interviewed I had previously worked with, so there was a professional working relationship with some, but not all, of the WCC instructors.

I explained to each participant how the data was being used (towards the obtainment of a PhD), how it may be published (digitally/print and perhaps in an academic journal or conference), and that final copies would be available if so desired. I provided ample time at the onset and conclusion of each interview for participants to ask any additional questions or voice any concerns.

### **3.5 WCC: Single-Site Research**

This section will present the different elements specific to the WCC case study, including an overview of the interviews, pilot, interview schedule, participants, coding practices, transcription process, and coding using NVivo.

#### **3.5.1 Qualitative Interviewing**

After reviewing my research paradigms and case study methodology, I selected semi-structured, qualitative interviews of a small sampling of WCC learners and instructors. This type of sampling would allow for diverse perspectives and experiences on the topics of emotional safety and identity expression within HE online learning. Due in part to time and ethics restraints,

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nine instructors and nine learners were successfully recruited for this research study. A small sampling such as this is a limitation.

I wanted to remain neutral in the interviews, so I critically reflected upon my approach. Staying neutral during an interview was my attempt to bracket my personal assumptions and create a space where participants could truly explore their own thoughts and emotions as well as draw their own conclusions. I did this by not imposing my views, definitions, or answers to the questions and by redirecting the conversation back to the participant and seeking out what they thought and what they experienced. I spoke in modest amounts, was nondirective, tried to maintain rapport, created an interview protocol, and analysed what was said while in the process of interviewing (Yin, 2011).

I also followed Yin's (2011) guide to qualitative interviewing. Qualitative interviewing has three characteristics. One, the "relationship between the researcher and the participant is not strictly scripted" (Yin, 2011, p. 134). It is informal and interactional (Mason, 2018). Two, the researcher "does not try to adopt any uniform behaviour or demeanour for every interview" (Yin, 2011, p. 134); a conversational mode is preferred and thus adopted. Three, most questions, especially the critical questions, are phrased in an open-ended manner (Yin, 2011, p. 135). Open-ended questions can lead to more in-depth conversations to explore additional views and feelings and develop unexpected themes (Mason, 2018). Qualitative interviewing is also time consuming and requires planning, revising, and piloting (Mason, 2018).

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I created an interview schedule (Figure 3.2), not as a formal, structured script, but to allow for similar flow and experience between interviews. The interview schedule allowed me to remain more neutral by setting a tone for each interview and providing me with consistent verbiage and ideas for prompt questions. Prompts were typically asked in an open-ended fashion rather than in a leading fashion, such as "Can you please elaborate more on this" or "Can you please clarify what you mean by that?" My comments on what participants said remained neutral, with responses of "That is interesting" or "Thank you for sharing." During the interview, I took field notes to document noteworthy items on the interview schedule.

Using the pilot interviews with the interview questions assisted in checking understanding of the wording of the questions as well as in correcting grammar issues and style or readability concerns. The interview schedule was sent out and revised with the assistance of WCC learners and colleagues (none of whom participated in the study), two WCC administrators, and some family members and friends. It was important that plain English was employed, as some of the participants were likely to be English Language Learners (ELL). It was my hope that the wording of the interview questions would not be a barrier to participants answering.

Piloting the interview schedule resulted in useful revisions to the wording of the interview questions and the overall cohesiveness of the schedule. In the original version of the interview schedule, the first question posed was "How do you define identity?" The feedback received was that this question could be overwhelming or confusing to the participants at the beginning of the interview

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and was thus not an ideal first question. The pilot group felt that developing some rapport and exploring the participant's background and experiences in online learning would put them more at ease and thus better able to answer this question later in the interview process. I agreed, and thus the questions at the onset of the interview became broad, open-ended questions, progressing towards more direct questions about the topics in this study. The first question in the interview schedule was revised to "How many classes have you taken/taught online at the college?"

Pilot feedback resulted in additional prompts being included in the interview schedule. For example, because the word "identity" may not be fully understood in the question "How do you define identity?," additional words or sentences were added if the participants needed them. These included "How do you define yourself?" and "What aspects of yourself do you value the most?" When no significant revisions or suggestions came back, the final interview schedule was established.

Some of the questions in the interview schedule were also inspired by the research of Faircloth (2012). Faircloth found evidence for identity-in-practice in formal learning environments, the need for the development of a learner voice, and the support needed to allow space for this to occur. The interview questions used by Faircloth were written in plain language and used a variety of synonyms for concepts. For instance, "...what activities were most motivating (interesting, engaging) ...allowed you to relate what you are studying to things that mattered to you (your culture, your family, your interest?" (Faircloth, 2012, p. 193).

Table 3.1 shows the final interview schedule used for the interviews with the questions then rationales for the questions added for readers of this thesis. The rationales ensure a connection to the research questions and to ensure the questions being asked had purpose and were related to the overall research questions of this study.

<p><b>Interview Questions</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How many classes have you taken/taught online at the college?</li> <li>2. Think about your experience as an online learner/instructor.             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. What were your expectations before you started the course?                 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Expectations of yourself?</li> <li>ii. Your peers?</li> <li>iii. Your instructor?</li> <li>iv. The college?</li> </ol> </li> <li>b. Were your expectations met? Why or why not?</li> </ol> </li> </ol> <p><b>Rationale for Inclusion</b></p> <p><i>With a topic such as identity and emotional safety, this question was included to gently ease the participant into the conversation. These questions would also assist in creating rapport and trust.</i></p>
<p><b>Interview Question</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Besides the content matter, what aspects of the course were most motivating or interesting?             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Did anything in the course make you feel anxious or uncomfortable?                 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. If yes, was there anything that helped ease these feelings?</li> </ol> </li> <li>b. What aspect of the course did you value the most?</li> </ol> </li> </ol> <p><b>Rationale for Inclusion</b></p> <p><i>This question was designed to move the conversation towards the experiences of emotion while teaching/learning online. To do so, I invoked specific emotions often associated with safety or feeling unsafe.</i></p> <p><i>Values were also introduced. This was done to begin a conversation towards aspects of identity and what the participants valued in the course.</i></p>
<p><b>Interview Question</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Were there any aspects of the course that allowed you to relate what you were learning to what matters to you (e.g., your culture, your family, your interests)?             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. What did you like about this?</li> <li>b. What did you dislike about this?</li> <li>c. Did you feel that relating what you are learning to what matters to you had any impact on your learning? Your grade?</li> </ol> </li> </ol> <p><b>Rationale for Inclusion</b></p> <p><i>This question was designed to start a conversation around identity and identity expression. Values, preferences, and relating self to learning experiences are all part of that conversation.</i></p>
<p><b>Interview Question</b></p>



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5. Can you think of a time in your course that you felt comfortable enough sharing something of interest to you?
    - a. Why was that?
    - b. Was there ever a time in your course that made you feel uncomfortable?

***Rationale for Inclusion***

*This question was designed to start a conversation about identity expression to learning and emotional safety.*

<p><b>Interview Questions</b></p> <p>6. What would you need to feel safe or comfortable (not anxious or fearful) when sharing information about yourself or things that matter to you and your peers? Your instructor? The college?</p> <p>7. To what degree is expressing yourself and your views an important part of your learning?</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">a. Is it important to your overall academic success?</p> <p><b>Rationale for Inclusion</b></p> <p><i>These questions directly link to the research questions and address the possible relationship between emotional safety and identity expression.</i></p>
<p><b>Interview Question</b></p> <p>8. How do you define yourself? What is your identity?</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">a. Is expressing your identity important to you?</p> <p><b>Rationale for Inclusion</b></p> <p><i>Understanding that there are different realities and truths, this question was designed to better understand how each participant defined identity and to ascertain if or how important identity expression was to them.</i></p>
<p><b>Interview Question</b></p> <p>9. Is the expression of your identity connected to you feeling safe? Explain.</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">a. What type of connection is there between the expression of identity and emotional safety?</p> <p><b>Rationale for Inclusion</b></p> <p><i>Again, this question directly links to the research questions. This question allowed the participant to explore this relationship rather than suggesting the type of relationship.</i></p>
<p><b>Interview Question</b></p> <p>10. What is your role/your instructor's role in all of this (ensuring safe learning environment, allowing for identity expression, etc.)?</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">a. The college's role?</p> <p><b>Rationale for Inclusion</b></p> <p><i>This question was designed and included to address the research questions.</i></p>
<p><b>Interview Question</b></p> <p>11. What more would you like to say on this topic?</p> <p><b>Rationale for Inclusion</b></p> <p><i>Ending an interview with an open-ended question allows for continued conversation on any of the above questions. A lot of topics and questions had been asked throughout the interview, and this open-ended question allowed the participants to explore their overall thoughts on the subject and to share any additional experiences.</i></p>

Table 3.1: Final version of the interview schedule, with rationales added.

Each interview was scheduled according to the personal availability and comfort level of each participant. One interview was conducted face-to-face at

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WCC, while the remainder were conducted over the telephone. All interviews were digitally recorded. Each participant received the consent form in advance of the interview so they could sign it before commencing the interview. Time was also taken before the interview started to answer any questions or concerns of the participant. An interview generally lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

At the conclusion of the interview, I recorded additional thoughts about what was shared in my field journal. In general terms, my field notes contained overall impressions or thoughts that emerged in the interview that I had not considered or were of interest at that time. For instance, I was taken a bit aback when one participant talked about not wanting to share in her online discussion board because her instructor was also in charge of her work placement and she feared reprisal or unforeseen consequences to future employment. I had not considered this type of scenario when I designed the study or read through the literature.

Each participant either provided a pseudonym or was assigned one at the conclusion of the interview. If they chose to be assigned one, they had the option of choosing a gendered name or the name of an object (e.g., a type of flower). Overall, the interviews were uneventful in terms of technical or scheduling issues. Schedules were easily accommodated, and the technology used to record the conversations was used without any difficulty.

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### 3.5.2 Participants

The criteria for participation in this research study was to be a currently employed WCC instructor or learner who had either taught or completed an online course within one school at WCC. Since ascertaining how participants defined their own identity, pre-screening participants based on any type of demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, or ethnicity) was deemed unnecessary. Identity and self-identification ought to be defined by the participant rather than the researcher, as evident in Illeris' (2014a) layers of identity previously detailed. Several optional demographic questions were asked of participants, but a response was not required.

Each participant understood that all demographic information was optional to share after completing the interview. They were asked an open-ended question (e.g., "What gender do you identify with?"). Participants were asked about their gender, ethnicity, WCC program area, and prior experience of either taking or teaching an online course. All 18 participants were currently enrolled in an online course or were instructors teaching online courses at WCC.

To elicit participation in this research study after ethics was obtained, I arranged a meeting with the dean of a school at WCC to discuss the research design and garner formal support. This school was chosen because at the time it had a high number of online learners and instructors teaching online, was one of the largest schools at WCC, and was receptive to research initiatives.

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The dean committed to supporting this research study and sent an email to the school's program coordinators and program leads requesting their and their learners' voluntary support and participation in my research. From those who responded, the reasons for participating and supporting the research ranged from eagerness to participate in any type of applied research initiative at WCC, to interest in this topic, to wanting to incorporate new ideas into their teaching practices. No incentives were given to participate in this study.

For participating instructors, they situated a participation package in their online courses for their learners' consideration. This package contained an overview of my research study, the ethics clearances, and my contact information was situated in numerous online courses across the various program areas in the school. If interested the learners would contact me directly via email.

An instructor participation package with the same information as the student package was created but tailored to instructors. It was sent directly to the school's full-time, part-time, and casual instructors. In total, nine learners and nine instructors took part in this study (n=18). Of the 18, one interview was conducted at the college face to face, while the other 17 were conducted over the phone as per their request. The option to conduct online interviews was also provided.

For the learners, eight identified as female and one abstained from answering. For the instructors, eight identified as female and one identified as male. This gender imbalance is representative of the learner and instructor population of

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the program areas of the school represented in this study. It would be interesting to repeat this study in other programs areas at WCC that are typically more male-dominated, or at least more gender balanced. In Chapter 5 I will discuss the possible implications of having an almost all-female population for this study.

Three participants abstained from providing their age for this study, but all were older than 18 years. For the learners who shared their age, the age range was from 22 years to 35 years, with two learners abstaining. For instructors who chose to share, the age range was between 25 and 50 years, with one instructor abstaining.

For ethnicity, there were varied answers as this too was open-ended (i.e., "What ethnicity do you identify with?"). One learner responded, "My parents are Mexican." For the other participants who chose to share, the ethnicities identified were (verbatim) Hispanic, Caucasian, White, WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), Aboriginal, African Canadian, and Asian. Two participants replied "no" when asked if they identified with a certain ethnicity. After conducting the interviews, I coded the data.

### **3.5.3 Coding**

I sought to answer several questions before commencing the transcription and coding process. I based my questions on Mason's (2018) work on how to migrate qualitative interviews into data. My questions were:

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- Do I count my field notes and impressions jotted down after the interviews as data?
  - Do my interactions and utterances in the interviews count as data?
  - Does the content of what participants say in audio as well as what is recorded in the transcription count as data?

After deliberating on and assessing each of these questions, I decided that the audio recordings along with the transcriptions would form the basis of the research data in this study. My utterances and interactions would become context, but not necessarily data used for this study. Any nonverbal data obtained from the one face-to-face interview would not be used as that type of data was not collected in the other interviews.

While a copy of the original interviews was preserved, digital copies were made, analysed within an audio editing software package, and used to transcribe the audio-to-text files. These text files were later imported into NVivo for analysis. The coding and analysis in NVivo will be detailed in the next section.

The audio interviews were imported into GoldWave (GW, [goldwave.com](http://goldwave.com)), a shareware audio editing software package. This software was chosen for several features useful to the analysis of audio recording. It permitted the export of audio files to virtually any audio format. This enhanced the ability to share the recordings to virtually any technology platform. Copies of each interview were stored in original .wav format as well as converted to .mp3

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format. The original interview was preserved without modification. Smaller .mp3 files were used for detailed analysis.

In the GW illustration in Figure 3.1, the audio waveform appears above the time stamp. This was helpful as it became possible to zoom in and out to examine sections of the audio in detail, mark important points (e.g., the beginning of each question of the interview) for later analysis and reference, and so on.

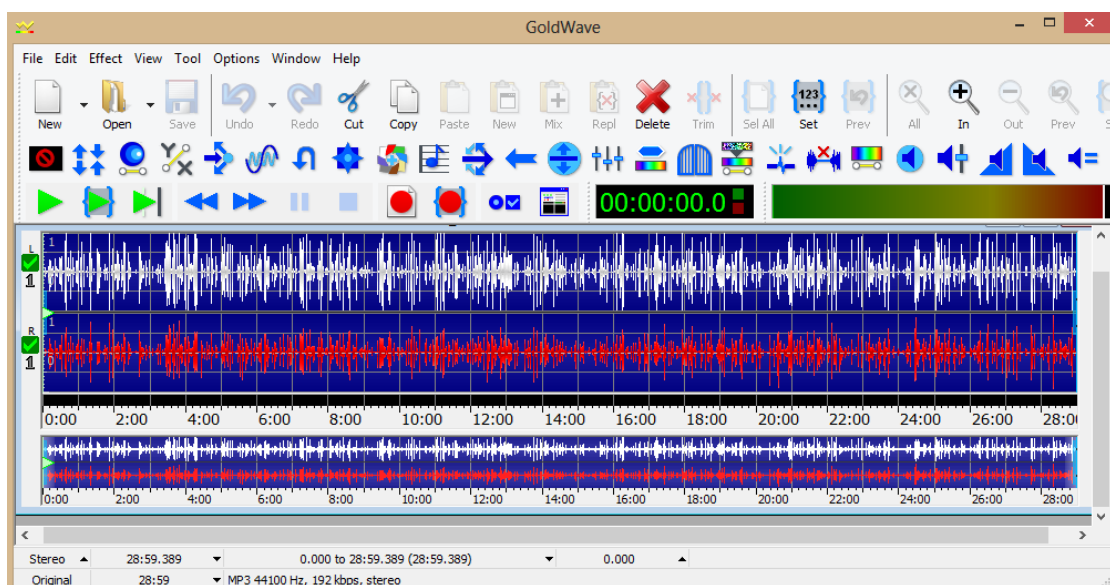


Figure 3.1 A complete interview with Andromeda Jane in GW format

In this view there are two timelines: the large upper area for editing and the smaller complete timeline at the bottom. Visible at the bottom of the frame are statistics such as the length of the audio file. Andromeda Jane's interview was 28 minutes 59.389 seconds (28:59.389, lower left) and was one of the shortest interviews in this study.

To illustrate the audio analysis, interview question 3 from the interview schedule was chosen at random. This question asked: *Besides the content*



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*matter, what aspects of the course were most motivating or interesting?* In the example in Figure 3.2, the recording was expanded to focus on the period of 2:31 (2 minutes, 31 seconds, or 2' 31") to 3:06. This region covered one interview question and the response. I began asking the question at 2:31; the response was given at about 2:40. Question 3 ends at 3:06. These timestamps were transferred to the text transcript of the interview.

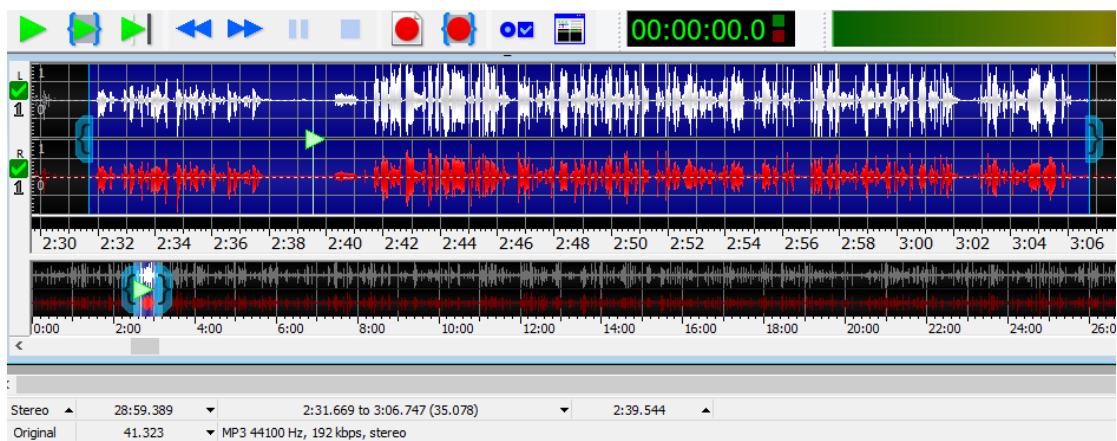


Figure 3.2: Question 3 in the Andromeda Jane interview

There were often issues with the quality of the sound recordings during an interview. In one instance, the participant turned her head away from her speakerphone while speaking to say something to a child who had entered the room. This resulted in a change in volume. I edited the volume of the sound segment for this event so that I could clearly hear what was said without changing the conversation. The audio across the recording (i.e., normalization of the volume) was adjusted so that transcription would be easier.

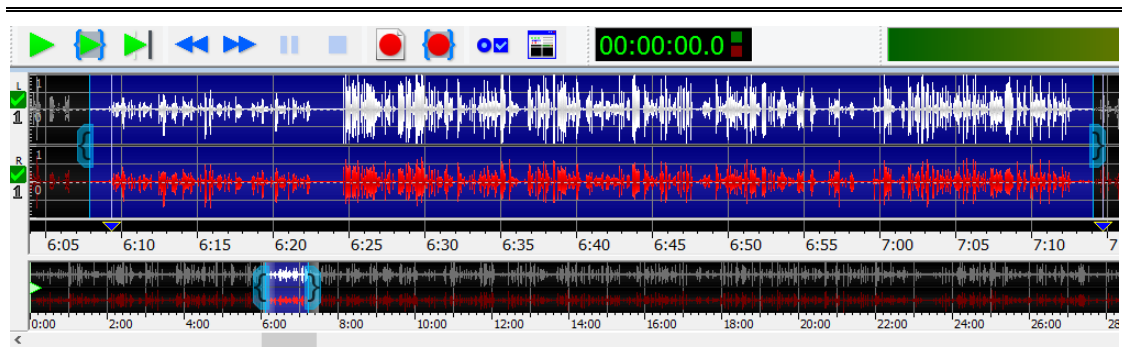
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### 3.5.4 Transcription

The interviews were transcribed from audio and typed up within Microsoft Word to form a text document. Transcribing data is not without flaw. Mason (2018) contended that transcriptions are

always partial as a record of an interaction...judgements are made...about verbal utterances to turn into text, and how to do it, and for some verbal utterances there are simply no written translations. (p. 133)

To illustrate the transcription process, I will use a different question from the interview schedule. This question began at 6:09 with the interviewer and the response at 6:24 (Figure 3.3). Line numbers were inserted into the transcript for identification of location and discussion. In this case, the line numbers within the interview began at line 49 and concluded at line 54. This interview lasted for almost 29 minutes and was recorded in text in 228 lines.



49 **INTERVIEWER:** [06:09] Was there any aspect of the course that you took that allowed you to  
 50 relate what you were learning to matter to you, such as your own interests, your family, your  
 51 culture—anything like that?¶

52 **RESPONDENT:** Ah, yah, I definitely, like uh, like ah religion course, this religion course, ah,  
 53 yah like within, I guess, within the group discussions, discussions on certain values. Like I was  
 54 able to express, like aspects of my culture, eventually certain, yah.¶

Figure 3.3 Audio segment and transcript segment

Much effort was put into capturing what participants said verbatim. Sometimes there were challenges in not hearing them well in the recording or not understanding some words. I listened to some audio clips repeatedly and at length just to ensure I was capturing the right things. This was time-consuming, but I believe it yielded an accurate representation of what was said in the interview.

### 3.5.5 NVivo

Unstructured data such as audio requires tools to ease analysis. I used NVivo, a software package from QSR International, to analyse my qualitative data. In its basic form, NVivo permitted the import of the text transcripts of each of the learners and instructors. It then allowed separation into various people, cases, codes, and so on. The unaltered full text of the transcripts was imported into NVivo.

Analysis of the text took place over a period in an iterative fashion. An early pass through the text was broken into the various questions: Question 1, Question 2, and so on. This permitted the examination of a question across all interviews. The questions could then be categorised into instructor and learner groups.

NVivo supports rich data types from text, images, audio, video, emails, and so forth, which makes it possible to begin to refine the codes and related literature. As stated earlier, it was an iterative process. Figure 3.4 illustrates the interview question approach to the creation of nodes within NVivo.

Beginning	0	0
Instructor or Student	2	2
Course	11	22
aspects of the online course do you	17	38
any aspects of the courses you don't	12	23
Discussion Boards - Interaction	12	30
Courses taken - taught	15	18
what your expectations were	18	23
expectations of yourself	10	12
Sharing	10	38
Sharing things personal and interests	11	32
Sharing Helpful	10	19
Sharing Do Not Like	10	32
Sharing and Improved Grades	17	38
Identity - sharing	15	28
Identity - what is	17	26
Sharing - changes	7	13
Instructor - Different or Helpful	6	15
Expressing Yourself Important to Learning	11	14

Figure 3.4: Early NVivo coding

As the data was examined and re-examined, other concepts and themes became apparent. For example, if a learner said something that I thought was important or significant, to not lose track of the statement, I created a new node called "Good quotes" (Figure 3.5). This was initially a holding category to

aid in recalling items of significance. These nodes continued to change, evolve, and grow over the course of the analysis. I asked each person at the end of the interview if they had anything else to say. Coding this question permitted the recall of this question across the interviews.

●	Non Content Look Forward	2	2
●	Role of Institution	15	38
■	Safety	17	55
●	Feeling Uncomfortable	15	48
●	Safe - Instructor Role	16	51
●	Good quotes	14	44
●	Anything else to say	3	4

Figure 3.5 Evolving node classifications in NVivo

NVivo proved invaluable in sifting the audio text and structuring data within the interviews and creating and substantiating themes that emerged.

### 3.6 Qualitative Argument

A qualitative argument in qualitative research is the construction and communication of a perspective, interpretation, line of reasoning, or analysis (Mason, 2018). After critical analysis of the data and reviewing the different types of qualitative arguments (Mason, 2018), I selected the qualitative argument that will describe how a phenomenon is experienced. It will emphasise the "role of human experience and encounters in their explanatory logic" (Mason, 2018, p. 222). My argument will be reflexive and multivocal, meaning I will "show a sensitivity to a range of interpretations and voices in

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[my] data, and the complexities of how these come together in relation to the phenomena [I] am explaining" (Mason, 2018, p. 224).

The qualitative argument constructed for this study is thus: Emotional safety and identity expression are part of transformational, quality learning. Feeling safe within an OLE is a necessary condition for some learners to express aspects of their identity, resulting in a perceived increase in grades. Identity expression in OLEs thus becomes important to teaching and learning and the conditions for sharing identity online ought to be encouraged and enhanced. The role of the instructor is paramount to achieving this aspect of quality in online learning.

### **3.7. Presentational Methodology**

Given the qualitative nature of the data, a methodological approach to how utterances (i.e. qualitative data) would be presented was considered. My use of a multivocal and reflexive use of a qualitative argument formed the basis for how I chose and included different utterances. In some instances, a few words or a sentence was all that was needed to illustrate or support the argument. In other instance, a large utterance was included to better illustrate complexities or to underscore a significant aspect of the argument. Understanding my own biases for selecting utterances, as well as an effort to seek a balance between including use of utterances Chapter 4 was continually revisited throughout writing up this thesis.

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### **3.8 Summary**

This chapter provided a detailed overview of my research strategy and design. After contemplating the research questions and context, I selected single-site methodology. My ontological perspectives, epistemological positions, and axiological assumptions were also detailed, with ethical considerations of this study. The design process of the WCC case study was described, including the qualitative interviewing, selection of participants, coding, transcription, and analysis of data. Two major limitations of this research study were highlighted.

Chapter 4 will present my findings under three major sections: emotionally safe OLEs, perceived impact on grades, and identity expression and self-disclosure in OLEs.

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## **Chapter 4: Emotional Safety, Identity Expression and Self-Disclosure in HE OLEs: Findings Explored**

### **4.1 Overview**

This research study set out to examine emotional safety and the expression of identity in OLEs at a Canadian college, to ascertain if learners and instructors perceived these topics to have an impact on grades, and to determine the level of importance of these topics. The findings presented in this chapter centre around emotional safety and identity expression within OLEs at WCC. For ease of reading and for quick identification of a learner or instructor participant, learner participants will have an "L" behind their pseudonym, while instructors will have an "I" behind their pseudonym (I).

### **4.2 Emotionally Safe OLEs**

From the data, four themes emerged pertaining to emotional safety in OLEs. The themes are negative emotions, trust, OLE design, and data security concerns. This section will also explore the perceived level of importance and impact on grades that participants attributed to these topics.

#### **4.2.1 Negative Emotions**

Online learners and instructors from WCC who participated in this study felt both positive and negative emotions within their respective OLE. Positive emotions positively impact learning, whereas negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety, boredom, shame, anger, and sadness, negatively impact learner motivation, performance, and learning (Rowe, Fitness & Wood, 2018). Fear in



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learning can manifest as fear of academic failure (Jackson, 2010, 2018), distrust (Bewsell, 2012), fear of appearing thoughtless or unintelligent (i.e., self-image), or fearing complications from social interactions with peers (i.e., social fears) (Jackson, 2014, 2018). Data analysis highlighted more instances of negative emotions than positive ones, notably fear and anxiety.

Courtney (L) was part of a cohort of peers that was enrolled in online and traditional classroom courses simultaneously within a career program. She felt this type of learning path impacted how she acted within her OLE.

You don't want to just throw out things because everyone can see your posts. But I think if it was a bunch of random people you've never met before...you'd be a lot more free in what you are...say in expressing your idea and why you think...it's different from theirs. You don't want to seem like you're shutting someone down, especially when you have to see them again the next day in another class.

Courtney's (L) fear of being judged or seen as less intelligent than her peers was evident throughout her interview: "So, what if you answered [the instructor's question] wrong...you feel like an idiot to everyone else... Everyone's really judgmental...you don't want to seem stupid." Courtney (L) associated her and her peers' uneasiness and fear of judgement with not feeling safe in the OLE.

Other people...say, "I totally agree with you, but I didn't want to say anything in front of the instructor"...Or they don't want to seem like they are wrong in front of the other classmates either...Everyone wants to ask this question, but you don't want to say anything. I don't think a lot of people feel safe.

As a result of her fears, Courtney (L) admitted to remaining generally silent.

Courtney (L) also had the reality of having her instructor directly involved in her work placement. She was anxious about employment reprisals for self-

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disclosing or over-sharing her opinions within the OLE or to her instructor. She stated, "they would remember me...and I wouldn't be able to get a job. I mean, it's already tough enough. They say there are tons of jobs, but again, it is who you know."

Power dynamics and authority within an OLE was a surprise finding of this study, but not surprising for a learning environment. Daley, Cervero, and Bierema (2018) argued that adult learning environments are not neutral, but rather "replete with hierarchies and privileges conferred along the lines of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and other status markers" (p. 398) and that "adult education must be viewed and handled as the real world because the power relationships that structure our social lives cannot possibly be checked at the classroom door" (p. 390). Understanding power dynamics in learning is important because "in educational contexts, the power of knowledge is a critical component of social, academic, and cultural development and identity" (Lovorn, Sunal, Christensen, Sunal, & Shwery, 2012, p. 72). If power dynamics are a critical component of identity, then they are also part of transformative learning and quality.

To illustrate internationalization of online learning in Canada and power dynamics, consider the following quote. A learning environment changes

the ways in which teachers and students communicate, how teachers' perceptions of the dominant culture can positively and negatively affect the learning environment, and how they recognize and implement power or practice autonomy in teaching settings...trust and dialogue exist to allow freedom to find a place to breathe. (Lovorn, Sunal, Christensen, Sunal, & Shwery, 2012, p. 84)

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Trust and communication are instrumental in overcoming the negative impact that power dynamics can have in learning and in establishing an emotionally safe OLE. Further research is needed, however, on power dynamics in OLEs in Canada, especially around involuntary self-disclosure, assessment of said sharing, and the possible impact of power dynamics on emotional safety.

Amanda (I) empathised with her learners in this situation and found herself having to assess self-disclosures and viewpoints of her learners within the OLE and then go on to organise their work placement.

...whether it is anxiety or fear of expressing thoughts and opinions and...being graded for that and...having that instructor involved with work placement. So, there is a fear that, 'Well, if I really say what I am thinking, then I'm not going to get a good job...If I express something and I am vulnerable, what happens to that information? Is it like Facebook when I say something and it's going to haunt me in 10 years?

Hannah (I) also mentioned this power differential and shared how it made her feel.

There is definitely this...power relationship, which is implicit...explicit as well. This dynamic between the instructor and the student. We are assessing them, and so the student probably has very much of a heightened sense of what we're looking at, you know, because a lot of things we see all the time, we think, "Oh, yeah, as they progress through the program this will develop," right?" So, we are not seeing it as they might interpret as, "Oh no, they didn't like what I said." They would take on that worry that probably isn't as justified long term. But on the other hand, they are being graded and they are—it's out there! When you put the written word out there everybody gets to see it, and I can totally understand where they're saying they would worry how this impacts their futures, their grades. So maybe a takeaway in that for me would be some upfront creating that safety of how things are private—I couldn't use it in any form outside of that classroom.

Having an instructor responsible for a learner's work placement as well as assessing self-disclosures within an OLE could negatively affect emotional

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safety. It is understandable that learners in this scenario would exercise caution when self-disclosing or sharing aspects of their identity. That being said, in some learning settings, such as a clinical setting for nursing, an instructor possessing explicit power over learners may be welcomed, equated with experience, help prevent harm to patients, and assist the instructor-learner relationship (Chan, Tong, & Henderson, 2017). One consideration is for HE instructors to reflect upon power within their own OLE and consider opportunities for learners to exercise power, as learner-centred learning has been linked to motivation and engagement (Cochran, Reinsvold, & Hess, 2017).

Over-sharing and lack of professional conduct were fears Samantha (I) had in the career course she taught. Samantha (I) said, "so that is where my anxiety would come...it seems [they] are willing to say things when typing they would not be willing to say face to face with someone. So, it is a little bit disconnected...." She offered her instructional strategy for overcoming her over-sharing and unprofessional posting fears.

We set a requirement for each post. [Learners] need to provide background or theory for how it connects with what they are saying. They need to give their own experience or opinion about a particular thing, and then they need to give a citation and reference. So, they are welcome to have their own opinions, and we all do, and those are good to discuss. We just have to be mindful that we are not presenting our opinion as fact when it is not.

On a different topic, Samantha (I) thought her learners in the career program should act as professionals rather than learners and saw her OLE more as a pre-employment training environment.

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Many, many learners in our program are already employed—they're professionals in the field and they're upgrading...so we really do emphasize that "you are a professional" from Day 1...so you can be a student and a professional at the same time. I am...But the requirement of acting professional we emphasize right from the start because this is a career program...

This perspective was a surprise finding. Relating back to Illeris' (2014a) identity model, work and learner part-identities could coexist relationally within a learner's central identity, but further research would be required of Samantha's (I) learners to ascertain which part-identity (i.e., learner or work) they related to more. Samantha's (I) conviction, however, is that learners who are enrolled in an OLE geared towards career employment should possess a work part-identity as part of their central identity and thus act and perform accordingly.

Carla (L) was not open to communicating through the medium (i.e., the OLE).

A lady one time shared things about herself and that would make you understand and observe in a special way when she says something like, "Being a single mother, mono-lingual, white lady..." and I was like, "OK" ...like, I know that if I am in class, physical class, maybe I would open that way. When I am online, I don't feel so free to open that way.

Carla (L) felt less free to create peer relationships when she had to communicate without body language and visual cues than she would in a traditional classroom. Carla (L) felt that sharing over this medium gave her anxious feelings and was less inclined to be open with her peers.

But online you do not open [up] so much... [In a classroom] you have to watch your body language, the tone your voice is submitting, maybe you are doing some critique that is with good intentions, right? When you write it sometimes it feels like tough, or rough. Like, "I don't agree with you!" So, I write again. "No, no, no. Don't think that way!" So, you don't think that way...and you [end up saying] something so positive and you say something else...it takes so long. You can't create

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relationships because there is no relation between those students and me like a relationship that exists while you are in a classroom – physical classroom. So, I don't have problems with my sharing, but I think that I don't open as well as I do in the classroom.

Katie (I) was anxious too, but more about her workload, lack of control over pacing of the course, and managing her learners' communication within the OLE.

For my [online] course, it was not paced, so students were submitting assignments at any point in the course and there were 14 written assignments...and so I was anxious about the end of the course and knowing that there could be potentially hundreds of assignments all at the same time. So that was a kind of personal concern or anxiety around that course...and also knowing that, if the students decided to submit all of the assignments at once, there wasn't anything I could do in terms of giving them feedback or help in doing other assignments. It was just, "Here's the grade"...and then grade the next one...grade the next one. There sort of was no process. So, for that course that was definitely an anxiety. And then, again in that same [online] course, they are writing quite personal responses, so I've had a couple where the content of what they'd written was disturbing or concerning. One student talked about a friend's suicide, for example.

Amanda (I) felt this way as well.

I guess I feel anxious when I haven't read the posts because you never know what will be in a post. If you are missing posts you may be missing unprofessional writing that you should be tending to, or a request from a student."

Sometimes anxiety around over-sharing or type of sharing within an OLE is linked to issues of control, teaching experience, and communication preferences. Further research is required on examining instructor anxiety in OLEs around self-disclosure and how it may impact their sense of emotional safety.

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Another example of an issue stemming from lack of control came from Pamela (I), who did not design her OLE nor was she able to make any edits.

I didn't truthfully like the way that the course I was teaching was designed. It wasn't designed well...If you're not comfortable with maybe the course that's designed, then it affects also the way you facilitate it. So...I love to try new things. I mean there's risk involved, but if you don't take any type of risks or any form of innovation there's going to be risk involved, but if you're not making changes and taking risks, your course is going to be stagnant.

Whether an instructor can design or edit their OLE is program specific at WCC. Following the QA rubric provided in Chapter 2 (see Appendix) would be one way in which an instructor could confidently design quality learning experiences.

Both positive and negative emotions were found in the data. The negative emotions found most frequently were fear and anxiety. Fear in learning is consistent with research findings as a pervasive and a highly reported emotion in learning (Jackson, 2018). From a physiological perspective, fear triggers stress hormones in the body. Once triggered, "fear is not diminished but rather needs to be properly assigned and controlled" (Schiller, Levy, Niv, Ledoux, & Phelps, 2008, p. 11523).

Instructors' fears can be addressed in part by educational development, increased control over the design and facilitation of the OLE and increasing their technological efficacy. Learners' fears can be addressed in part by an active OLE instructor who uses humour, care, and concern; encourages networking and building connections among learners; provides effective and

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timely feedback; is readily available; provides clear instructions; and prevents learner overload (Rowe, Fitness & Wood, 2018, p. 15).

#### **4.2.2 Trust**

Trust is a cornerstone of feeling safe and is pivotal to self-disclosure and sharing of identity. Trust can be defined as the "the firm belief in the competence of an entity to act dependably, securely, and reliably within a specified context" (Grandison & Sloman, 2000, p. 3). Having trust leads to trusting behaviour.

Trusting behavior is defined as expressing openness and sharing, and it is the willingness to risk beneficial or harmful consequences by making oneself vulnerable to another group member...Trustworthy behavior is defined as expressing acceptance and support, and it is willingness to respond to another group member's risk taking in a way that ensures that the other group member will experience beneficial consequences. (Nam, 2014, p. 240)

An emotionally safe environment allows learners the opportunity to build trust and then demonstrate trusting behaviour, such as self-disclosing or sharing aspects of their identity. Trusting behaviour is also necessary for the creation of a cooperative learning environment between learners to accomplish learning goals (Nam, 2014; Wang, Wu, & Huang, 2018).

Trust can also be built by establishing confidentiality protocols. Sally Jones (L) was grateful to her instructor for ensuring class discussions remained confidential. "Our instructor in the beginning...mentioned any information shared within this group is confidential and shouldn't be shared. I guess you just hope that is the case." Perhaps *hoping* could be replaced by *knowing* with the instalment and discussion of confidentiality measures within OLEs to



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better ensure emotional safety. Trust-building strategies and encouraging positive emotions could also be considered by OLE instructors or instructional designers: "...develop instructional resources such as checklists for examining students' own trust behaviors as a self-evaluation activity for each subject matter" (Nam, 2014, p. 246). In Nam's study, learners who took part in trust-building strategies within their OLE saw an increase in their academic achievement, bettered their attitudes towards online cooperative learning, and had greater overall satisfaction.

Mitigating sensitive self-disclosures in OLEs can be an instructional challenge for instructors as well as a preference. Katie (I) commented, "They are writing quite personal responses, so I've had a couple where the content of what they'd written was disturbing or concerning. One student talked about a friend's suicide, for example." However, sensitive self-disclosures can also have benefits. Julie (I) stated that self-disclosure and sharing of identity from her learners aided in providing better feedback: "The more you know about them and their background, it really kind of helps you give better feedback." Self-disclosure can also aid learners in the development of workplace skills. This is often the case at WCC, where programs train and develop learners to become members of a certain profession. Amanda (I) stated

I think it is really important because once you get into the workplace you have to be able to share and listen respectfully to other people's opinions, they don't agree with in a staff meeting...you do miss things with the nonverbal and with the face to face, but at least they can share their opinions on things and can go back and forth and say, "I don't see it that way" and share, "This is what happened when I was in China" and "This is what happened when I was in Columbia" and "This is how we did things in Africa." I think it could be really rich if people do share.

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Instructional strategies for facilitating online discussions, besides trust-building activities, include providing clear examples, providing guidelines for controversial subjects, being present, creating social presence, and instituting a peer-facilitation approach (Grogan, 2015; Oh, Huang, Hedayati Mehdiabadi, & Ju, 2018; Rovai, 2003). The MANIC strategy (Curry & Cook, 2014) is one strategy that can guide controversial subjects online. It encourages learners to focus their discussions based on readings. The MANIC model asks these questions:

- What was the **M**ost important thing in the reading?
- What was something you **A**greed with in the reading?
- What was something you did **N**ot agree with in the reading?
- What was something you found **I**nteresting in the reading?
- What was something you found **C**onfusing in the reading?

Without using guidelines like MANIC for topic conversations, open-ended comments, often with assumed anonymity, can quickly become charged, leaving other learners within an OLE feeling unsafe and distrustful. The result is often further mitigation and facilitation from the instructor, and it is on everyone within the OLE to rebuild trust and establish a sense of emotional safety. If learners adhere to discussion guidelines like MANIC, thoughts shared remain focused and safety is preserved.

Instructional strategies, however, do not address the larger issues pertaining to data security and retention. This can better be addressed within HEI's policies and procedures as well as communicated to educators and support

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staff. Ethical scenarios, litigious realities, professional responsibilities, and data breach concerns are all aspects that an OLE leadership team is more equipped to address.

No one formal leader at the top, no matter how ambitious and knowledgeable, could possibly contend with the complexity of issues related to the quality management of OLEs. Leaders must be mobilized down, across, and throughout the organisation to realise the full benefits of massive institutional investments in online learning systems. (Holt et al., 2013, p. 389)

Further research is warranted into how HEI leadership teams in Canada are addressing data security concerns within Canada.

Data security is a vast topic with numerous areas impacting both instructors and learners in online HE OLEs. The main concerns raised in the interviews in this study pertained to retention of discussion forums, the self-disclosure of personal information within online discussion forums, and the desire to retain privacy over fears of what may happen. Data practices, regulation of learner information in OLEs, and privacy norms within OLEs in HE is an area that needs to be advanced in research, especially surrounding its impact on emotional safety, because privacy norms can

reduce the potential for inaccurate, biased, or outdated records to unfairly limit students' future opportunities. Education privacy norms implicitly recognize that students are not static objects, but evolving individuals shaped as much by their experiences in learning environments as the specifics of instruction an assessment. In creating a barrier to promiscuous disclosure, they allow students to move beyond past mistakes. (Zeide & Nissenbaum, 2018)

The role of the instructor in creating an emotionally safe OLE was a recurring point of conversation within the interviews. This theme will be divided into

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three sections: the importance of emotionally safe OLEs, teaching presence, and course design.

#### **4.2.2.1 Importance of Emotional Safety**

One aim of this research was to ascertain if the topic of emotional safety within OLEs was of any importance to participants. Instructors overwhelmingly agreed with their learners' need to feel safe within an OLE. Katie (I) tried to integrate emotional safety into an instructional approach.

I start out by creating this safe base for students to be able to talk to each other when we get into the issues that will involve them a little bit more, that are more sensitive, to be able to share that "Who they are" and "Where they're coming from" a little bit more comfortably.

Samantha (I) stated that creating a safe OLE was her primary role as an online instructor.

I think that is primarily my role, before anything else, to ensure it is a safe space for everyone to contribute. We do that through a lot of conversations at the beginning of the course before we have learners post about what the expectations are and how we will be together in this classroom. Very clear guidelines. Because that is the most important part of someone not feeling safe to share what they think or what they feel, even if other people have an opposite view. It still has to be safe and respectful to share that. There is not going to be very much learning happening in that room if safety doesn't exist...it is my primary responsibility.

These findings are consistent with literature that finds learners within a cooperative OLE who "feel that tutor and peers value their contribution and care about their well-being, perceive their study environment to be safer... tutors should [thus] create a psychologically safe, nonthreatening work environment for their subordinates" (Schepers et al., 2008, p. 770).

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Amanda (I) wanted to emphasize that emotional safety extends to the OLE instructor: "Instructors also have to feel safe. We're doing our best, we are responding to [learners], we're being thoughtful about the words we are selecting...."

Hannah (I) acknowledged the importance of emotional safety in her OLE but alluded to the practicality and challenges of doing so.

I think safety is *hugely* important, but I think the mastery in being an instructor would be to "How do I navigate that on a group and on an individual basis?" Definitely having some parameters up front, about how we can treat each other and feel safe and be respectful of each other in the class is good.

Several instructors identified that the online course was much more labour intensive than a traditional classroom, thus impeding their time and ability to be more present. Amanda (I) commented on the time it takes to be active as an instructor in an OLE.

Timing, and the time it takes to establish and continue a relationship online, is a whole different dynamic than face to face, in my perspective. I found it much more time-consuming. Other instructors do not feel that way, but I felt...it was more of my time. More troubleshooting, more emailing, more comments, more daily—I logged in daily and checked on a daily basis...I found it labour intensive, to be honest...In [a classroom] you can kind of talk to the whole group [and say], "You know, I read the discussion" or "We were involved in a discussion and this was my impression," so that they could feel validated, safe, and supported. Online, I tried to put that piece into...it's called the newsfeed on the platform we use...I tried each week to summarise what I had heard in the discussions and give positive, validating feedback. Students still felt that I didn't give enough individual feedback to them to meet their emotional needs.

Hannah (I) too found that being present in her OLE was labour and time intensive. She felt that she needed time to provide emotional support and

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individual feedback to her online learners. She tried to meet the large time and labour demands with weekly summaries.

Providing timely feedback, being an active participant in discussion forums, and mitigating interpersonal and communication issues as they arise were other practical challenges brought forward in the instructor interviews. These challenges are important to address as they do have an impact on emotional safety and learner experience within the OLE.

Joanne (L) appreciated prompt feedback from her instructor on her posts within the discussion boards.

We get marks [from assignments] back immediately and I find it good. It's like, "OK...am I on the right track on what you are expecting on my post or am I not?" Like..."Am I frustrated or am I doing good?" In the other online classes, it's like, "OK. When do we get our marks for our online post?" [The instructor] says, "Oh, I give them all at the end." OK, if I'm not doing completely what you are wanting that means all my marks are going to suck versus if you give me a little bit of feedback more near the time when it is happening. I know that both instructors are also teaching the in-class [courses]. I don't know if they are prioritising those ones or not, but I wish we were getting more immediate feedback. I'd like to know, am I wasting my time on these posts or am I doing it wrong or not?

Sally Jones (L) appreciated her instructor's involvement by how the instructor shared expectations about availability.

Yah, I mean the teacher and the teacher's involvement...That was always really encouraging. He would even go out of his way and say, "Hey, listen, I am not in cell service this weekend. I don't have reception."...that was really nice. It felt like he was really on top of things, and felt like it was, it felt like we were still in good hands despite not ever seeing him. So that was a motivator.

Active involvement and prompt feedback are part of establishing a teaching presence (see section 2.3.1). Samantha (I) considered teaching presence

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necessary for emotional safety. She advocated active monitoring of discussions and shared strategies on creating an emotionally safe OLE.

I think that it would, it could possibly be a challenge if the course wasn't attended to very carefully. People would feel they were in an unsafe environment and they would feel that they could not express their opinion if they felt it was different than their instructor or other students in the class. I think that some people might feel bullied, I mean there is so much work that has to be done in creating a community, a safe community that this doesn't happen—that's crucial.

I think it all again comes from the front loading that we do and how this is a safe space and how everyone needs to be within this space with each other and the understanding that we are supposed to be sharing our experiences and our opinions that helps us to grow and make connections with our learning. I think it also helps for them to understand that I am reading every single word that is posted on there and I know, the people who are fearful that someone will be mean to them or judge them, know that I am there making sure that reading and making sure that if that happens we will be redirecting and dealing with it immediately. Those who may be the person who wants to make a flippant offhand unkind remark knows that I am reading, and their name is connected with everything they do in that course shell and there is no anonymity. I think that, in the same way that it would be in a face-to-face class, anything you say or do is seen within that environment.

Stacey (I) established her teaching presence by being active in online discussions.

I was always active on the discussion boards as well, so I would include some of those experiences, because, in the face-to-face classrooms, I'm always giving some of that back to the students and sharing those experiences with them. So, I tried to incorporate some of that in the online course as well. I find with students they need to be comfortable, not just with the instructor they're working with, but also with each other. So, they [need to build] strong connections among themselves, with other students empowering them to share those experiences...what I find to be really important for their learning, I guess.

Even though frustrated by workload, Hannah (I) offered some insight into teaching presence to better ensure emotional safety. She extended teaching

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presence into the media of typed discussions as limiting things done in conversation easily accommodated.

I think that you need to show presence and you need...to write clearly, because that's tricky because a word can be perceived in different ways...I think that when you are teaching online...how you write, how you respond, when you respond, that the student feels you are there, that you are available, that you are listening, and that you can validate something that they said to you. They might also try to push and challenge, but that's where it becomes quite tricky in an online class that the student does not feel that you are picking on them, or that...they're vulnerable. They're putting things out there knowing that you're looking at it and assessing it. So that's a vulnerable place to be, and they don't always open up to a conversation you could have in class where you can put something out and people can talk about it and you get an opportunity to add to it or say "No, no, that's not what I meant." Whereas when you write something down, it takes away from that.

Meeting learners' emotional needs and establishing teaching presence is certainly a major component of an emotionally safe OLE. Julie (I) indicated that being an effective online instructor meant understanding and being concerned for the wellbeing of the learners. "To do [teaching] well online you have to really inquire about their health and wellbeing and then encourage them in career directions." Samantha (I) furthered this by saying that online instructors need "to engage [the learner] in a way you would in a classroom."

Stacey (I) created an audio recording of her voice and inserted it into the course to help ensure that the emotional needs of learners were being met.

I would just do an audio clip of my voice, just talking to them and posting it up there. It wasn't even new information; it would be exactly the same type of information, but somehow, when it came from me, from my voice, it seemed like that engagement piece, that connection that you get in the face-to-face classroom that you are often lacking in the online classroom.



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Some learners feel they are highly auditory. A teaching strategy like this could be integrated into most OLEs as a gesture, but further research would be needed to see whether this strategy, or others like it, impacts the emotional safety of learners.

Mary Cameron (I) taught a cohort first in a face-to-face class and then later in an online course. This was a unique experience in the interviews. She appreciated seeing the cognitive aspect of her learners online. She said:

I'm facilitating a course right now and it's really interesting to see the learners in a different light, because I do know these learners from [a] face-to-face [course] as well. But to actually see their learning in a different way, to have that different perspective of them actually learning...because when you're in face to face they have these blank looks and look like they're bored. I don't get to see that online, which is nice, but I get to see a little bit more of what is happening in their heads because we have a lot of these discussions...The only thing I don't like about it—sometimes it has a disconnect you have with the learners because you are not physically seeing them. That level of contact is not as nice. I think especially if you really don't know the learners. That becomes a challenge sometimes to get them engaged.

In the face to face, Mary Cameron (I), like most instructors, responded to visual cues such as blank looks. She found that the online environment provided more information about what the learners were thinking.

Most of the learners desired a strong teaching presence in their OLEs. There are challenges and scalability concerns with establishing a teaching presence, such as workload, providing prompt feedback, and mitigating issues as they arise, but a presence does contribute to learners feeling emotionally safe while in an OLE. Competency of instructors was part of the Schindler et al. (2015) conceptual model of quality for transformative learning.

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### 4.2.3 OLE Design

Aspects of course design were frequently mentioned in many of the interviews. As highlighted in Chapter 2, section 2.2, instructional design strategies can better assure quality and thus better ensure an emotionally safe OLE. One aspect of design was front-loading an OLE with information.

Samantha (I) shared her experience.

We post a lot of information at the very beginning of the course about proper netiquette and the way you should be communicating as a professional in this course. I have yet to, within the course shell that I have access to, reprimand anyone or redirect anyone. It has been a very respectful environment.

Not all instructors had control over their own course or its design, which caused frustration and even stagnation, which are negative emotions. Stacey (I) reported such emotions.

I didn't truthfully like the way that the course I was teaching was designed. It wasn't designed well...If you're not comfortable with maybe the course that's designed, then it affects also the way you facilitate it. So, I think I really, I love to try new things. I mean there's risk involved, but if you don't take any type of risks or any form of innovation there's going to be risk involved, but if you're not making changes and taking risks, your course is going to be stagnant. I think those are things that really motivate me and excite me when I'm teaching, especially online. There are so many things you can do with students. Technology is an amazing thing.

For the instructors that could contribute to their OLE design, the beginning of the course was given special consideration. Take Mary's (L) story as an illustration of this point.

Yah, I mean I shared quite a lot of information in that first week when we were introducing ourselves...our instructor encouraged us not to just put up information about ourselves, but to share more than just "Hi, I do this, and this, and this" and to respond. We had to respond to other people, and often an indication like, "That's a great post, thank you for

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sharing."...Someone shared how they had just moved to Canada and they're really missing their family and they're really feeling down and out. Then someone commented back, and I chose to comment because I felt for them, "Gee, you have moved, and you don't know anybody." It led us to say, "Well, we're meeting up for face-to-face classes on the Tuesday. If you'd like to join us, you are more than welcome to." So, I did feel safe, and I think if someone was inviting me online, I'd really feel safe to share information and to share personal stuff about me.

Peter (I) noted that learners sometimes need additional instructional support to be more successful in an online environment: "I do think that some people, just based on their background or experience, do need some kind of bridge or adjustment in order to be good online learners or effective online learners." Thus, in his course, he designed a supplemental orientation for learners using a synchronous technology to show his presence as the instructor and set expectations for the course. He created a live video session so that learners could more fully understand the course expectations and could see and hear him as the instructor. This provided a bridge to the online environment.

I do an orientation session so that there is no expectation of regular lectures or anything like that. But I have taken to doing what I call an online orientation (others might call it a podcast). It is basically a live session by Adobe Connect with the software where the learners can see their instructor, can hear their instructor. I demonstrate that I am not "a robot at the other end of the computer," the way I like to comically phrase it to them. The idea is that I implore them to join in this live online session. I make it abundantly clear what the expectations are for this type of online course. It is heavy on the independent work, it is heavy on the reading, it is heavy on self-direction. I mean I can send them news posts and email and even post audio commentary until I am blue in the face, but they must understand that they must take the initiative. They cannot just show up week in week out like they can in a class and get what they need. They need to schedule the time or be willing to ask when they have questions, as opposed to asking a classmate when you are in a room of 60 people, to ask the instructor who might be the only person in the class that you have a relationship with and get those messages very early on in the course.

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Peter's strategy was congruent with other research (Abdous, 2019), which suggests the provision of online orientations for learners new to OLEs to aid in their success.

At the intuitional level, our conclusions reiterate the need to provide students with a comprehensive online learning orientation to ease their transition into online learning, particularly for first-year students with no prior online learning experience. By doing so, administrators can boost students' self-confidence and readiness to persist, succeed, and take future online courses. (Abdous, 2019, p. 43)

The first class in an OLE can be an opportune time to build trust and rapport, identify potential issues, establish teaching presence, and address emotional safety.

Learners offered some strategies for OLE design and teaching. Sally Jones (L) appreciated the documentation her instructor included within the online course, which she could reference while sticking to the pre-existing schedule.

There were forms that I could really appreciate. I could reference back to—we had outlines, we had a course assignment agenda, which was kind of, basically stated what chapters were due on which days. It was followed really well. Like the teacher didn't...change any of the dates, so it was really reliable. It was posted there, and it was easy access for us so I could go back and check what was due, when it was due, and that was really helpful.

Savannah (L) enjoyed weekly discussions in the online discussion forum and the fact that the requirement to post and respond enabled her to stay involved.

Well, we had discussion boards that we were to post on each week. And those were, yah, I would say that those were motivating as well. It was interesting to learn what other students were learning and to interact with them in that way. We were responsible for posting and to respond to one of our classmates' posts. That was a way to stay involved and it still felt you weren't as isolated—it's kind of developed that community or classroom feel with them. That was motivating to me, that was interesting to me.

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Joanne (L) appreciated being able to choose from a variety of assignment options. Some options allowed her to participate easily because it was a topic of interest, while others were less familiar, but made her think.

In one class I have to do all of the discussion posts, whether you like them or not. In the other one, [the instructor] says, "OK, here's your module and here are four options. Choose one of those four options in the module that interests you the most." So, I feel like that one is nice because I get to speak about things I am passionate about and that I enjoy. I really like that. On the other hand, the other one forces me to talk about things that I may or may not like, but it also forces me to look at different views on them. So, I find there are kind of pros and cons in different ways. The other one is really, really easy. I can speak passionately. Everything flows really easily, but the other one really makes me think on some of them.

Hannah (I) shared that weekly activities in her OLE were too strenuous for some of her learners in the early part of the course as they were new to online learning.

Well, one of the things the course was developed was to have weekly activities. That proved to be too much for the students to keep up with the readings, the discussion boards, and the assignments. There was a lot of challenges then, and I found the first few weeks of the course, probably the first month of the course, I was doing a lot of just helping them navigate the system rather than teaching the course. I had one student three weeks into the course, and I had been emailing him saying, "Are you in the course or have you withdrawn?" And finally, the student responded, "I can't even find which *room* we are supposed to be in!"

OLE design elements and instructional strategies found in this study included type of learning activities, frequency of activities, documentation, and online orientations. Design elements of an OLE are part of the larger quality-in-learning conversation. In the Schindler et al. (2015) conceptual model of quality, transformative learning occurs through student engagement with content, clarity of outcomes, and a learner-centred approach. The role of the

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instructor is significant in creating and maintaining a quality OLE, and thus becomes paramount. Sometimes this role is jointly held with other HEI support staff, such as instructional designers, while other times it is the responsibility of the OLE instructor to ensure quality and integrate these types of design elements. Illeris' (2014a; 2014b) processes and dimensions of learning (Figure 1.1) also emphasises the interplay of content with social interaction in the acquisition of knowledge in transformative learning.

#### **4.2.4 Data Security Concerns**

Data security, or the protection of digital data, was an unexpected finding. Data security concerns could be placed under "fear" in the previous section as many of the data security concerns propagated from fears. However, I decided to allocate a section just for data security concerns as issues within this topic are diverse and substantial (Alsmadi & Prybutok, 2018; Manuel, 2017; Yang, Sun, He, Zhou, & Liu, 2017). To narrow the scope of data security issues, only the specific data security topics mentioned by participants are addressed, including the retention of discussion forums and personal privacy preferences within OLEs.

##### **4.2.4.1 Retention of Learner Digital Data**

Data safety concerns over the use and retention of learner digital data, such as discourses originating from emails or discussion boards in OLEs, are part of the larger conversation pertaining to QA and emotional safety for both instructors and learners. I want to present a scenario to better illustrate the

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importance of data security pertaining to learner data retention from OLEs in HE and how it could impact trust, quality, and emotional safety.

**Scenario:** Learner A self-discloses confidential and/or incriminating information about herself to her peers during an online discussion forum. These discussion posts are retained by the HEI for an extended time, where it becomes vulnerable to data breaches. Learner B of the same online cohort decides to share Learner A's information with outside parties (e.g., a potential employer or social media). A data breach such as this can pose unimagined safety, employment, or personal ramifications for Learner A. The trust Learner A may have had in the HEI, her instructor, and her peers would likely be diminished as well as her "dignity safety" harmed (Callan, 2016). Issues of quality, trust, and data security would likely come into question by relevant stakeholders and data security policies and practices towards online learning scrutinised within the HEI.

Data retention was a concern for many learners and instructors in this study, and, like Learner A in the scenario, many had an implicit trust that security measures were already in place and protecting self-disclosure and conversations. Some, however, like Sally Jones (L), were not as convinced: "Once the course is done, the information is gone, right? I'm sure it is somewhere." The data does go somewhere, but where it goes is likely to be specific to each HEI. Katie (I) commented, "Who has access to it? The students don't know that—it's not something we address in the online courses ahead of time." Carla (L) said:

If I say something in [a traditional] class, in some way it disappears, right? But online there is a registry. I don't think I feel uncomfortable, but I think you filter—you read twice or three times before you answer. You have the chance to say, "I'm not going to say this. I better change that." Right? When you are talking in a class, you let yourself go.

Jin (L) was uncomfortable as well: "If I am sharing a lot of personal information—like my address, where I live, what I look like, what my family

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relationships are, and all that information released to complete strangers—that is a big concern to me." Where does this information really go? Who has access to it after the course is complete? Or, as in the scenario with Learner B, what if this information is compromised? What responsibilities and recourse does a learner, an instructor, or the HEI have in the event of a data breach?

These concerns could be addressed through institutional policy and procedures. This is certainly an area for further research. Instructors teaching in OLEs ought to consider the type of information their learners are asked to disclose with a perspective towards data retention and security concerns.

Jin (L) shared:

It's not the overall sharing of thoughts and experiences that bothers me. For example, there were questions during the course where they asked us to share past disputes we've had with co-workers or past troubles we've had with family or such. I think writing it in a paper is OK but sharing it in a peer discussion...I don't think it made me very comfortable.

#### **4.2.4.2 Privacy**

Another dimension of concerns in data security that emerged from the data, and that was the desire by some to retain privacy within an OLE. Privacy as a legal right versus a personal preference (i.e., user comfort) is an important distinction, especially within HEIs in Canada, where robust privacy laws are legislated and enforced. Privacy as a preference, however, is applicable to HEI, learners, and instructors and HEI quality leadership teams should include privacy preferences into QA processes, educational development, and learner support offerings.



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Instructors should purposefully consider privacy issues along with technology, pedagogy, and content when planning class activities and seize the opportunity to not only teach students about the course content, but also about how to manage their online identity and digital footprint...Students should be included in the conversation about privacy in online learning contexts. They should express their concerns and help institutions and instructors as they develop policies to guide the instructional use of new and emerging technologies and seek secure methods for using new and emerging technologies in support of learning activities. (Dennen, 2015, p. 56)

Julie (I) was reluctant to self-disclose too much with her learners as she feared consequences. As such, she established defined personal boundaries.

I'm *really* private... You're the student, I'm the teacher. Boundaries, that's the word I'm looking for... you just have to be cognizant of what you are sharing—that you are not sharing *too much*... I think a lot of instructors would be, but it just depends on the maturity levels sometimes... and you don't know that online. I think I've pulled back on that because I see how it can come back to bite you. Meaning, like my faith, for example. I don't feel comfortable sharing about that at all and I never would because that's something that just doesn't fit with the subject matter I teach. Like, if I say to people, "I am a Christian," right away they're going to write me off. So that is something that would not be great for my evaluation down the road.

From her statement, Julie (I) seemed fearful about perceived repercussions of self-disclosing aspects of her identity online and being discounted for her religious beliefs. Part of an emotionally safe OLE, however, is the expression of identity without fear of humiliation or harm, perhaps suggesting that her OLE lacked emotional safety. Julie seemed fearful of how she would be judged. Trust-building activities could help alleviate this fear, but they do not address personal preference towards privacy.

Cynthia (L) did not want to share anything of a personal nature with her peers unless it was required.

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I mean, if you have to introduce yourself and say a little bit, but not go into depth like how many siblings or family or all those other...stuff...I feel they're not really necessary for the program. Yes, we need to comment on each other's discussions and everything, but I feel that you can comment on someone's discussion board without going into detail about how many kids they have or what their favourite thing is to do. Because at the end of the day we work to get better educations.

Her fear around involuntary disclosure could be attributed to personal privacy preference, but as it turns out, Cynthia's (L) fear was more about not wanting to disclose information about her troubled relationship with her family.

Some people may be uncomfortable. Like for me, if the...question is, "Oh, how many siblings you have?"...I don't get along with my siblings—you don't want to mention the people you don't get along with. I wouldn't want people to, "Oh, do you have a good relationship with them?" If I say I have a good relationship with them and people are asking me, "Why do you have a good relationship with your own family?"...you have to go into more depth and answer the questions and it's an invasion of your own privacy, which I personally do not like. If it's too personal for me, I would rather not talk about it. There is some personal stuff I will not talk about with my friends because I find that they are personal...that's how I am. Everybody is different.

Cynthia's (L) desire for privacy and not interjecting personal information into her learning becomes understandable. Being uncomfortable within an OLE for involuntary self-disclosure is not conducive to an emotionally safe OLE.

Privacy and respecting learner and instructor need for privacy is important, as previously discussed, especially if it impacts their sense of emotional safety.

Creating personal boundaries was discussed by Stacey (I), whose need and preference for personal boundaries online were entrenched in her prior work experience.

I mean, this [OLE] is probably the safest work environment I have ever had. I used to work in a jail, so I've been pretty good about how much to share or not. I never feel uncomfortable...I know that I've had some really strict boundaries for so long because I was working in such a

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different work environment before. But now I probably share more than I am used to, but I still have those boundaries engrained in me because of my previous profession. I don't even think about it consciously anymore.

Helen (L) was not interested in self-disclosing personal information in her OLE as she thought that personal information shared by her peers, albeit interesting, did not assist her in relationship building as it might in a traditional, face-to-face class.

To be honest, I didn't put anything up on my profile other than just the important things like my name, my email address in case someone wanted to contact me. I didn't feel it was important for people to know what I was reading, my favourite movie, my favourite food...I am not a big social media person...So it was nice to get an idea and hear about everybody, but I still find it impersonal because you don't get to meet the people...Although we shared information about ourselves, I didn't feel that it was personal, like if you sat with someone and met them at a face-to-face class, right? You get to build a relationship with a person. I didn't feel that in an online course that you could build a relationship with someone. Like, other than sharing your course work.

Helen went on to attribute not seeing her online peers and their body language as barriers to building relationships. There are many strategies to address this type of discomfort, including the integration of video conferencing technologies.

Katie (I) did not self-disclose because of course design constraints and the feeling that her English course did not lend itself to sharing personal information.

Personally, I probably wouldn't choose to disclose a lot of personal information to any class. I think that's probably the same in my face-to-face classes. But also, the structure of the course doesn't really—in either course, doesn't really allow for it. In the sense that I am choosing readings and assignments that are important to me in the English course. You know, focus on topics I am interested in—there's that, but not on a personal level, I guess.

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Hannah (I) was professionally trained to believe that an instructor should be mindful of not self-disclosing with learners and retaining privacy.

I have worked with families who have been in very challenging circumstances, and my training is grounded in being very aware of what I am saying and when I am saying when you're in relationships with others. So, it doesn't become about me, it shouldn't be about me. So that's probably more to my own personal educational training than it is something that I have learned here at the college. I have definitely *not* learned it here at the college.

As some prefer otherwise, opting out of self-disclosure is acceptable in most HE learning situations. Kashian, Jang, Shin, Dai, and Walther (2017) found two types of participant categories that could be applied to learners in OLEs: askers and disclosers. They also found that people like people who disclose to them, people disclose more to people they like, and people like people to whom they have disclosed (Kashian et al., 2017). Self-disclosing and responding in kind within an OLEs show genuine appreciation and interest in one's peers and helps build rapport and a trusting and cooperative learning community. These are the pillars of an emotionally safe learning environment that fosters transformative learning.

Privacy in OLEs within HE is an important topic needing further investigation. Chou and Chen (2016) proposed that privacy issues are opportunities to explore, rather than threats: "The concepts of data protection, passive protection and active defence, should be integrated into school curricula as a foundation for information literacy in e-learning" (p. 139). Although speaking largely to instructional designers, their positive approach could be adopted by online learning leaders within an HEI.

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### **4.3 Identity Expression and Self-Disclosure in OLEs**

The second theme pertains to identity expression in online learning. This theme explored and discussed how identity was defined by the participants, the complexities surrounding identity expression online, as well as the role of the instructor in allowing for identity expression.

#### **4.3.1 Defining Identity**

A learner's sense of identity is continually impressionable and evolves through different learning experiences. Identity is "created, developed, and changed through learning—which all takes place in an interplay with the innate dispositions that are integrated in the learning processes and thereby can influence the learnings as well as the identity" (Illeris, 2014a, p. 69). I wanted to determine how the 18 participants in this study defined identity, as I believed multiple realities and multiple truths exist (see section 3.3). Gathering as many "truths" from participants on how they defined identity thus became critical to this study.

Not surprisingly, participants presented a variety of definitions, with no two definitions being similar. A sampling of some of the responses will be presented in this section to demonstrate the depth of answers given in the interviews as well as to illustrate the complexities involved in defining identity. As discussed in section 2.4, identity and learning are interlinked and necessary for quality and transformative learning. I would also assert that understanding how instructors and learners define identity would aid in further educational research on identity and identity expression within HE OLEs.

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Sally Jones (L) felt that identity consisted of "religion, beliefs...it's a sense of knowing where you belong." When asked the follow-up question, "So what would you say was your identity?" Sally Jones (L) replied:

That's a tough one to answer because every aspect is different...when it comes to nationality, I'm pretty proud. Like I was born in Calgary. My identity is just that. Canadians, and how we are portrayed in the world. We're just known as that friendly, you know, that friendly country that just fits there. Like, we're, we get made fun of sometimes because we talk goofy or whatever. I've very proud of my Canadian heritage, my Canadian identity, and with that it lets me be who I am. With respect to religion and political beliefs and all that. So that what Canada's about, it's about letting you be you with freedom. Like that would really be my identity. It's knowing that, in Canada, we can freely be who we are.

I included the two interview questions of Sally Jones (L) because I appreciated the interplay of the initial almost textbook-like definition of identity followed by the more in-depth and introspective response.

Helen (L) felt her identity was linked to her personality, which supports the Illeris (2014a) model of identity in terms of the personality layer connecting to the outer world.

From a personal point of view, my identity would be...my personality. My identity of myself would be my personality. So, my strengths and weaknesses, that is how I would view my identity. I guess you could also look at it very subjectively from a...like, "I'm a female between ages whatever whatever...I'm Caucasian, I'm from South Africa, I'm an international student online." You could view it as that as well, right? Like more statistics versus more "I'm driven and I'm passionate and I love to run..." You know, your personality and strengths and weaknesses and hobbies, I guess.

Katie (I) felt that identity was who they saw themselves as and about an external persona constructed and projected.

I guess it's both someone's own sense of self and where they belong and who they see themselves as, but also a kind of external persona

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that they choose to construct and project. So that identity is maybe not fixed, it's different context dependent, I suppose.

This was the case with Joanne (L), who shared some of her personal journey while providing her definition of identity.

OK, well, I'm a proud mom. I have a beautiful little boy. I am very happy that I am going back to school. It took me a road to get here. I think I am proud about myself in being able to express myself—I was in a really bad relationship for six years. Very abused, talked down on, wasn't able to express myself. So, I feel to be able to open, to be able to talk openly, to be friendly, kind of like I was before I was in this really bad relationship...I am very proud that I am a student. I mean, I'm a single mom. I have zero support from my ex-husband. As I said, he was not a very nice person. So, for me, going back to school is a huge thing and I'm really proud of myself for doing it...But I think, I have learned something. I have an education. I am going to be a professional. I am going to be able to back up in my profession from what I've learned in school. I am really glad!

"Proud," a sense of overcoming, and being an online learner are all things linked to her sense of identity.

Joanne (L) also brought forward emotions (i.e., excitement) as well as what Illeris (2014a) described as part-identities: work identity, family identity, and interest identity.

Andromeda Jane (L) shared a story as well when defining her identity. I appreciated her openness and found it interesting how she brought up safety as a component of her identity. Her identity seemed linked to her feelings of safety.

I would say that I am definitely someone who has been through a lot in the past, and I am continuing to grow as a person. Especially in the last year. Incredible growth in myself, like, I'm doing well in school, I have a job that I've been at for quite a while, enjoying it there. That things have been going well. Yah, like I'm content, and I'm safe, yah...That's a tough question.

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Mary Cameron (I) identified that her identity was connected to how she lived her life, her values, how she presented herself, and the work and activities she did.

My identity is connected to how I live my life. The things I find value in. In things I do to other people. How I present myself to other people. How I present myself to myself even. The type of work I do. The type of activities I do. I think those would all be part of my identity.

There were 18 participants in this research study with 18 unique answers.

This reaffirmed my research assumption that multiple truths and realities exist.

That said, there were some common threads weaving through most of definitions, including age, gender, nationality, culture, and religion. For example, Heather (L) stated, "I guess Canadian. I was born and raised here. I'm married...so I'm a wife. I work for the city. I am an animal lover with three dogs. I'm a student, I suppose." Jin (L) commented, "The first thing that comes to mind when someone asks my identity is my culture, my ethnic background...what I am interested in...So those are the two primary that will come to my mind...and the rest would be age, gender."

Identity—who you are, what you are all about, what you think is important, things that make up *you*. Your core values, beliefs, everything about you. I don't know, because I used to teach social studies, I think about Canadian identity. I don't identify it with Canada at all or hockey at all, even though I am a hockey mom, I don't have that as part of my identity. For me, it goes back to my faith, so that's where I identify, but that's not what I would talk about. (Julie, I)

It may be enough to conclude that defining identity for one's self is complex, its definition varying from individual to individual. This, however, is precisely my bias that identity is complex, personal, and holds personal meaning shaped by learning and by life experiences.



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### 4.3.2 Complexities from Identity Expression and Self-Disclosure

Sharing information and resources and self-disclosure with peers or the instructor is common within many OLEs. Sharing aspects of identity and self-disclosure can lead to an enriched and meaningful learning experience (see Chapter 2.4). Complexities surrounding self-disclosure, however, arose in the data, including the mandatory nature of self-disclosure in some OLEs, navigation of cultural and ethnic differences, expression of strong opinions, and encountering language barriers.

Katie (I) commented on the cyclical nature of feeling safe with expressing identity.

So, in thinking about one's own private self or something or expressing aspects of our identity that we know other people might have difficulty with, then I think it does require some degree of safety—like a feeling of safety before we are willing to do that. But then, as you express aspects of your identity that you are comfortable with, then the kind of response that you get presumably creates or destroys that sense of safety. That may be kind of cyclical as well.

Jin (L) felt that self-disclosure should not be assessed or shared online with peers.

It's just because you have to talk about past disputes or troubles you've had in your personal or social circles and I don't think...you shouldn't really have to share it with peers and people you never really met. So, if it wasn't required for a grade or for the course, I am a person who wouldn't really share a lot about my personal life in front of strangers.

This is an interesting and unexpected finding. I am curious if finding balance with a different instructional approach would remedy Jin's (L) concerns.

Respecting a learner's preference for privacy does not equate, however, to

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completely negating self-disclosure, as it does have benefits, especially in building relationships.

Relationships are paramount. If you're not relating to each other, or if you are not understanding where people are coming from or what they can contribute, then it's just rote learning. There's no depth to it. I think the same applies, especially online, because you're limited to writing and looking at clips and typing discussions that if we allow each other to share where we come from, what we bring to the table, then there's more engagement and there's better empathy and understanding to each other, and I think those skills will translate when they get out into the field. (Amanda, I)

Depending on the individual and the situation, ethnicity, culture, and language barriers are also complexities arising from self-disclosure. Helen (L) identified shortcomings in English skills when she said:

A lot of people do not have very good online skills in terms of English. You are reading it and it's hard to understand and you go off: "I don't know what you are trying to say." So, you have to go a little back and forward, back and forward, in terms of their cultural barrier. Sometimes that was a little bit of a challenge.

Peter (I) offered some insight on what he did to address these types of non-content issues and to help learners understand the "culture" of online learning. Some learners are not ready or equipped for the course they are taking. He identified learners that were "over their head" due to various factors as being the thing that made him most uncomfortable as an online instructor.

When I get that sense that someone is in over their head in my class, in that I mean maybe they have been many decades outside of any educational environment where their educational experience was in another culture, in another country, or in another language and that face-to-face. Now they are in an online environment and I feel uncomfortable of being put in the position of helping them succeed when they are out of their element in several different respects and I can sense this without even seeing or even hearing the learner. So that is something that I wish I could have seen very early on in the course and I could have encouraged that learner to seek assistance with

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adjustment to an online class or even to take the class face to face or do something else to help create that bridge between learning what they recall and the learning opportunity that they find themselves in. That would be the point that I would be most uncomfortable in as an online instructor: just encountering learners who are not adequately prepared for this style of learning.

Discussing hot topics and self-disclosing upheld opinions can be challenging for the instructor as well as for the learners involved in the discussion. Hannah (I) shared an interesting experience from when she was an online learner.

I had an experience very early on when I was a student...I was in a class, the topic was around disabilities, and one of the students wrote that she felt that only people who had a certain disability could work with others with disabilities. I have a brother who has a brain injury, and I thought, "He couldn't do that. He couldn't work with someone that had a brain injury" and that wouldn't be possible for him. I responded back, saying that I didn't think that in all cases, without disclosing about my brother, I wrote more general about how I didn't feel that was always possible. Then she wrote the most defamatory posting to *me* about how I was prejudiced against people with disabilities, and she just ranted. It was...embarrassing to me and it wasn't how I felt *at all*. The instructor didn't do anything about it. I literally cried, thinking, "How could someone misunderstand me so badly?" So, I wrote back and disclosed about my brother and said, "This is where I was coming from." She wrote back that she was actually a paraplegic and she was in a wheelchair. She really felt that she had things to offer to others that were in a similar position to her. Because we are online, we just have that window to see each other and we did work it out. But that has stuck with me. For years...that was probably 15 years ago that happened, and I haven't forgotten how that felt—to be so deeply misunderstood and then to have my eyes opened to her own experience, right? In an online class we can have challenges we weren't expecting. To have that happen when we were in a class, I would have immediately seen she was in a wheelchair, right? I would have had an opportunity to interact with her and really understood what she said the first time she said it. If she had said, face to face, sitting in a wheelchair, "I think people with disabilities could help others with similar disabilities," I could have said, "I understand people in your situation that yes, but my brother has a brain injury—he couldn't do that." We would have understood that right away, we wouldn't have had any conflict.

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I included such a long segment of her story because it resonated so powerfully with me. Here she was, over 15 years later, recounting a story of navigating a major miscommunication with another peer and having this entire ordeal transform how she currently teaches her OLE. Her story also touches upon importance of connection, sometimes of visual cues, and sometimes just of establishing ground rules online. All these efforts can lead to an emotionally safe learning environment. When learners and instructors feel open enough to want to disclose, then transformational learning can occur.

Self-disclosure and identity expression can be linked to deeper learning and is thus a necessary component for emotionally safe OLEs.

I think that true learning for me, and learning with depth means that you have to give of yourself, show of yourself, share of yourself... You can memorise something, write a test, and be successful and be an A+ student, but unless you can apply that or unless you can connect with people or connect with whatever field you are working in, is that success? (Amanda, I)

Some aspects of identity are easier to disclose than others. Katie (I) said: "I think it is so complicated because there are so many facets that go into creating a sense of identity. Some of those are easily shared and expressed and some of them less so."

An emotionally safe online learning environment can be likened to the environment of an ecosystem, with changing, interacting actors and components all situated within an incredibly interconnected community. The actors in an online environment could include instructor(s), learners, teaching assistants, and learner support personnel, such as librarians and computer specialists. Components may include course resources and materials, the

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integrated technology and software, institutional policies and procedures, as well as the more difficult to articulate aspects of an online course, such as interpersonal communication, group dynamics, and aspects of identity such as personalities, language, culture, and learning preferences. Every actor and component play a role within an online learning environment.

### **4.3.3 Importance of Identity Expression**

For the third theme, I wanted to ascertain whether learners and instructors thought identity expression and emotionally safe OLEs were of any importance, especially given the other issues they routinely encounter in online teaching and learning. If identity expression in a safe learning environment is part of quality online learning, how important is it to online learners and instructors?

Katie (I) hoped her learners could express their identities during the learning process.

Yah, ideally that's what I'm hoping for—that the writings or the exercises or the discussions that the students are doing are allowing them to...think about the identity that they have constructed or that they believe in and to be able to reflect on that in terms of the new content that they're exposed to at the college level.

I found it extremely interesting that instructors felt it beneficial for learners to self-disclose and express aspects of their identity, but when prompted about themselves disclosing or sharing aspects of their own identity, reactions were much more reserved and self-censoring. For instance, Hannah (I), said

I am always conscious as being an instructor of when that's appropriate. I think to myself, "So what would the student get out of

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this?" It should never be for *me* to share, you know, to my own feelings acknowledged or something like that. That's not my purpose. My purpose should always be "What does the *student* get from this?" In class my sharing about my own self, always very intentful.

Peter (I) erred on the side of not sharing or disclosing too much with his learners and established boundaries for his identity. He too wondered whether that would assist the learners.

I don't reveal too much about myself on a personal or professional basis to them, aside from baring it in the orientation where they can see and hear me, and I try to come off as a regular, real person. I don't share many examples of my personal professional life. I do try to keep it...not relegated. That is not the right word, I do try to keep it within the realm of the subject matter. And possibly to a fault—I am open to that interpretation—that I stick too close to the rubric and does such and such follow the expectations or if not, why. But at the same time, I do try to honor their insights. I was just saying when they apply, I will be very quick to comment on their insights or their stories or their narratives that they have shared, but I do not often share many of my own. That is something I have thought about in the past, so maybe...would that be too narcissistic or too indulgent to be doing that or would that actually help them? It is something I have thought several times.

Stacey (I), however, did want to share of aspects of her identity with learners to enhance engagement with them. She wanted to share experiences, but not personal things, and maintained boundaries.

I think it's important to share things with students. My experience, my education makes me into the role of teacher of the course, but I find every semester, since I've taught the course over and over, I am learning so many new things, too. I like to approach it that way with students so that they don't feel that every answer has to come from me all the time because sometimes I don't have those answers and that's why we are in the classroom together. I think it's important for them to know my experiences and know that that's the kind of person they can come to for assistance within their learning. But if I don't share anything about my experiences or just me personally, then I don't think the engagement is still the same. But obviously, at the same time, I don't share—just like a lot of people don't share too much with other people—like really personal things. It's not really a conscious thing for

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me—it's just part of what I do. I don't really know...I know that I've had some really strict boundaries for so long because I was working in such a different work environment before. But now I probably share more than I used to, but I still have those boundaries engrained in me because of my previous profession. I don't even think about it consciously anymore.

I find it significant that most of the instructors had not considered the topic of identity expression and self-disclosure within OLEs nor considered it part of QA, but after discussing it in the interviews agreed it was important. For example, Peter (I) stated:

I think that if students cannot situate themselves in the material that they are learning, then it is less likely for it to stick or they are less likely to be reminded of it later on. It becomes more perfunctory and more based on memory or paraphrase. Whereas if we see something on the news or just in the run of your daily life, and we think about that lesson on politics or lesson on social interaction and group conformity on one specific example, then it is more likely to stick into how you consciously approach certain situations. But I think that it is important that students refer to themselves in at least some aspect of their course.

Stacey (I) thought that people needed to know their identity to retain learning, saying:

Without having a sense of self or why you're learning, then how do you relate it?...I mean, identity is so important because if I don't know what my strengths and weaknesses are or what I need to work on or what's important to me or where I'm going after this, then the learning that is happening, I guess, they wouldn't be retaining it.

I gathered a sampling of perspectives from the learners that represents the breadth of viewpoints towards this topic. Courtney (L) believed expressing identity is important, stating:

I think [expressing identity] is important. I think everyone should be able to say whatever they want because then that helps other people get to where they want to be. It makes people open up their eyes to other situations.

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Mary (L) was unconcerned about expressing aspects of her identity.

No, actually, I never thought about that as a concern. I never thought "Oh, I'm sharing this personal information about myself" being a concern for safety. I never actually thought about that.

Andromeda Jane (L) believed expressing identity was extremely important and helped in understanding people of other values and interests. She said:

I think it is extremely important, yes. When you are able to apply the classroom to my values, interests, and beliefs, it opens a conversation for them to share their values, interests, and beliefs. And then I'm able to grasp how everyone is different, different values, and interests. Gives me a more open mind...Not just focusing on all my values, interests, and beliefs, like that's the most important, yah.

Heather (L) was content oriented and therefore less interested in expressing identity. She said:

I'm just there to learn the material. I guess in a class like Communications it is a necessary part of it because it is obviously on feelings, but for the other classes, I mean I am just there to learn. I don't need to know everyone's personal life story. They don't really care about mine, either. We see each other every day, it's not online studies is kind of your own space I guess—your own study. It is not a classroom where you interact with them all the time.

I wanted to leave Mary Cameron's (I) response until the end because in her thoughtful response she raised important considerations, including introducing self-disclosure and identity expression in increments once security and trust are established as well as commenting on what learners' post.

I think we as instructors can share at a certain level of their identity with the learners, and it may be through creating the bibliography of the last five years that they've done or "What did you do on your holidays?" kind of thing...or what your favourite trip was. Creating something like that where it doesn't feel "The learners are starting to get to know me, and I don't want them to know me." I know that there are instructors out there who say, "I come here to teach, and I don't want to know who you



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are." But in order to create that safety as I've sort of evolved in my own head, once you have created that safety and they are able to present their identities there, their academics do increase. So, you need to have a certain level of information that you are prepared to share with learners that the learners feel they can share at that same level of information. And once you find that those teams have shared that same level of information, it becomes easier to share other levels of information and then create that safety for learners within the environment. It's like working in a new work environment. "I'm working at a new job. I don't know who you are. How much do I need to share with you?" And you share little bits and pieces. But if you are trying to do something very concisely online for 14 weeks or 16 weeks, you don't have two or three months to create that level of knowledge about each other. So, you have to define what that base level is. Then, once that base level is met, you can add little more, little more increments—you can't do it all at once, but you have to be able to do little increments to improve that security for the learners online. Then, they can pour their identity into their work.

Her response seems to come from experience. Mary Cameron (I) felt that once security, or emotional safety, is established, learners will "pour" their identity into their work and learning. This almost becomes causal, meaning that if there is emotional safety, learner feel comfortable and trust in disclosing and sharing aspects of their identity. Referring to Illeris' (2014a) identity model, what Mary Cameron (I) is proposing would fit under personality or part-identities. This part of her identity found that she could easily share with her learners in order to build trust. As a result, she saw evidence of an increase in their academic achievement.

#### **4.3.4 Perceived Impact on Grades**

The fourth theme is around emotional safety and expression of identity within an OLE and its perceived impact on grades. Trust leads to trusting behaviours, which can help create an emotionally safe OLE. Does it lead, though, to improved academic achievement? Academic achievement (i.e.,

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grades), retention rates, and completion rates are typical measures used in HE to gauge learner success. As with identity, learner success can be defined by the learner.

Individuals' definitions of success vary depending on their background, discipline, previous achievements, and personal benchmarks for performance. So, success is, in many ways, subjective: a bare pass may be regarded as success for one person, while only top grades will constitute success for another. (Nyström, Jackson, & Salminen Karlsson, 2018, p. 5)

Typically, grades have been a significant area of concern to WCC learners and administrators and have been used as an indicator to better ensure quality of programming and instruction. Therefore, I examined them specifically.

The instructors and learners in this study were asked to consider whether sharing of aspect of self (i.e., identity expression) within an online course impacted grades. There were several "yes" responses from the instructors, with little elaboration, such as from Katie (I), who said, "I definitely think so, yeah" and Mary Cameron (I), who said

I would now say definitely 100% yes. I think learners can be successful to a certain level—i.e., they pass, they get decent grades. But once they start putting their identity and personality into something, their grades do go up. That they are putting that extra effort into things and you do see that distinct difference between those types of learners.

Stacey (I) had not given this much thought, but responded, "I guess I would say mainly in some ways; it probably has to."

A few notable exceptions help illustrate the complexities of sharing identity with academic achievement. Samantha (I) said:

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It's a requirement of posting that you would bring in your own thoughts, opinions, and experiences—that is definitely correlated to a number that they would get. But I think it would improve, I think that overall it would improve their grade to connect personal experiences and to have opinions about things. It means they're engaged and they're drawing connections and relationships from what they're learning.

Amanda (I) had similar thoughts, thinking that expression of identity was perhaps linked to deeper learning.

I think that [learners] are growing and stretching much more when they are making those relations. But they are marked on their big assignments, they have a group assignment and a paper and those are each worth 25% and then their participation and discussions are each worth 25%. So, it's like an assignment. Anybody can memorise and brain dump on content and get a good mark, but I don't know where the learning is in that. It's like rote learning and memorisation.

Hannah (I) equated more critical thinking with improved grades than she did identity expression.

Given the subject I'm teaching, I think so, yes. I'm not teaching other subjects, so I can't speak to that. My guess would be, "Yes, across the board." Given what education is about, that we should be able to think about what we believe and be challenged with other belief systems and to be really thinking critically about who we are and who others are and how we make sense of whatever topic we are learning.

Learners, too, were asked whether identity expression within an OLE positively impacted their grades. Some learners were equivocal in their responses to this question, like Andromeda Jane, who said, "I definitely think it does, yah." Other learners answered the question, but also brought in other factors that helped them improve their grades.

Having content that is personally relatable was brought up by several learners. Sally Jones (L) answered the question about identity expression impacting her

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grades with "Definitely. I would say so," but added that if topics in her OLE were personally relatable, it helped improve her grades.

There were some topics that I felt I could really relate to...so my grade was a little bit better...I just understood it better from experience, I guess. Rather than a subject that I had maybe something I hadn't been through or didn't understand. Yah, I would say so.

Carla (L) believed that the personal connection to what she was learning, or the relatability of the content, did positively impact her grades.

Sometimes sharing information to create the link between what I am learning and connecting that to something that happened in my life...I start to reflect on those things with my experience—helps. In those cases, I think it can give you better grades because it shows that you understand, you really understand what you are talking about.

Joanne (L) agreed with the question and talked as well about relatability of content.

It is very easy to speak about those things you are passionate about and the things you can relate it to. I know a lot of [the instructors] want you to put personal experiences in. So, in a topic I know nothing about or have anything I can relate it to, I don't know what it relates to, but it does make you think deeper.

Finally, Jin (L) said, "Yes, I think it leads to better grades because I am more engaged, and I am more interested." It seems these learners equate identity expression within an OLE to personal engagement with content they find relatable. Certainly, instructor involvement and effort into making the content student centred and engaging could also be a factor. Learner engagement within an OLE with pedagogically based instructional design has been documented (Czerkawski & Lyman, 2016).

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Cynthia (L) agreed that identity expression helped improve her grades. She also attributed being an online learner to her improved grades.

I think the first [online] course that I took, my grades were not...the best. But now, when I'm taking online classes, sometimes my online class marks are higher than my class marks. Because when I am online, I am highly focused on what I need to learn and how to understand it better versus when I am in class the teacher is teaching me and I don't put in that much effort into wanting to learn the whole thing.

Helen (L) was the only learner who thought peer sharing in her OLE did not improve her grades.

If you looked at the people who were interactive online, I learned a lot more from those people and I would actually, even if they weren't from my group, I would go and find their post and read it...[but] I didn't find the more I shared the better my grades were. I think a lot of the time I am not sure how they mark online courses.

However, when questioned further whether she thought her sharing and self-disclosure improved her mark, she commented, "I think it did."

Savannah (L) identified as a learner as a part-identity and attributed this to her ability to process new knowledge.

I think I'm a learner, that's the reason I learn so much...I'm a learner that learns by doing, so expressing what my thought processes or what's inside is really integral to cement the information to myself. And also, in terms of being able to process. I ask a lot of questions, obviously to help clarify ideas for myself, and it's really significant for me. If I weren't able to do that, I think my learning would suffer, suffer quite a bit. I think because I learn, I do what I need to ensure that I understand; I think my grades reflect in that. I think they reflect that learning.

Participants raised some issues about grading self-disclosure. One area of concern for Helen (L) was ambiguity about how grades were assigned with

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mandatory sharing and participating in her online class. She also equated working hard with improved grades.

I would put up a post and think, "Oh, this is such a great post!" And then my instructor gave me a bad mark and I thought, "Oh, I thought I deserved a bit more than that, right? I put a lot of work in that post and I put a lot of research for that post, and it didn't reflect in my mark." And there were other times I put up a post and I thought maybe she gave me too high of a mark for the effort I put in compared to some of the others who really put a lot of work into their posts and I didn't get the mark I wanted. So I think you look at your posts and you think, "Oh, this is a B or this is an A," and when you don't get that you are quite disappointed because you do put a lot of work into online coursing...Some of the time I would get a mark back and I would think, "What?!" You know I bled [laughs]...and what I got back where it was a B, and I would, "Aargh!" So, yah, I found that sometimes to be disappointing...I don't know how they grade you in an online course...For an online course you know that this week is 10% of your mark. How is that being graded? What criteria is required from you for an online perspective to achieve that goal?

One instructor equated engagement and interaction with herself online to better grades.

If I look at students that are very engaged in the classroom, regardless whether online or not, but they're very engaged, I understand them and I know them, I think they are interacting more. So, they're probably interacting with their peers, they're interacting with me. If they're interacting with me more online, then they're also, when I'm looking at grading like for a discussion board or group work, they probably have more of those checkmarks within the area that they want to be. Like, "I want to get a 4.0" or whatever it is—they're interacting more. They're meeting those levels within the rubric. (Stacey, I)

The aim of asking this question was to gauge participants' perceptions on whether they thought identity expression positively impacted grades. The answers were most often yes, but after the initial yes, the answers demonstrated that there were more factors involved than just expressing identity, such as relatability of content, interactions, and engagement.

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#### 4.4 Summary

After analysing data from 18 participants from WCC, I found that negative emotions are prevalent in the OLEs and that trust and instructional design are factors needed in the establishment of an emotionally safe OLE. Various data security concerns were also highlighted, including retention of learners' digital data from an OLE and privacy and privacy preferences from both instructor and learner perspectives. I presented how participants defined identity to illustrate the depth of responses and that multiple truths and realities exist.

The findings demonstrate that emotional safety in OLE is necessary for learners to feel trusting enough to express their aspects of their identity. The role of the instructor is becoming central to learners expressing their identities and ensuring an emotionally safe OLE. It may also mean that instructors need to share aspects of their own identities. The findings show that participants were almost unanimous that expressing identity improved the grade received.

Chapter 5 will review the original aims of the study as well as re-examine and answer the original research questions. It will then review my contributions to the body of knowledge and provide implications that the findings of this research study may have on policy, research, and practice. Chapter 5 will conclude by providing several areas of further research for consideration.

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## Chapter 5: Conclusions

### 5.1 Original Aims of Research

Quality learning and assurance is a strategic goal at many Canadian HEIs, such as WCC wherein quality is written into its mandate. Even as a strategic priority, there continues to be a lack of consensus on how to define and assure quality learning, which is important when designing and supporting assurance strategies and measures. Part of the challenge of defining quality is that the process can be political in nature and ought to extend beyond satisfying certain stakeholders (Harvey and Williams, 2010) Quality learning in HE ought to be meaningfully defined, tracked and managed, made affordable, distinctive, transformative as well as valuable to all stakeholders (Prakash 2018). Schindler et al.'s (2015) conceptual model of quality learning (see Figure 2.2), a comprehensive and scholarly design was introduced as a framework by which Canadian HEIs could being design and assure quality teaching and learning, especially OLEs. This model has cornerstones of accountability, purposefulness, exceptionalism and transformative learning and aligns with Illeris' (2014a) learning and identity theory.

One stakeholder in quality learning and assurance is the HE instructor. The role of the instructor is a significant. Within OLEs, the instructor can assure quality in several ways including the integration of QA rubrics for assessments, establishing an online teaching presence, embedding an orientation for learners, and being prepared, confident and competent with



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digital technologies. Being prepared and supported by the HEI will also aide instructors to design and facilitate a more emotionally safe OLE for learners.

Part of transformative learning and quality learning includes emotional safety of stakeholders, emotions while learning and identity expression within OLEs. Emotional safety and identity expression are necessary for complex learning and cognitive performance and thus important to quality learning and assurance (Pekrun, Vogl, Muis & Sinatra, 2017). Emotional safety can also be positively associated with goal achievement, personal engagement, motivation and lessened anxiety and important for identity expression within OLEs (Schepers et al., 2008). Illeris' structural model of identity (2014a, 2014b) provided a concise definition of identity for this research study. It was selected as it interweaves identity with transformational learning, and positions identity centrally within the learning process, thus making it an appropriate lens by which all QA designed and implemented at a HEI can be considered.

This study sought to investigate the perspectives of online learners and instructors from WCC, using single-site methodology. After completing the research design strategy, the following research questions were drafted.

- To what extent are feelings of emotional safety connected to the expression of identity within an HE OLE?
- Is the expression of identity and feelings of emotional safety within HE OLEs important to learners and instructors?
- Does the expression of identity in an OLE have a perceived positive impact on learner grades?

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- What role does an HE instructor play in creating and maintaining an emotionally safe OLE?

## **5.2 Answering Research Questions**

In the following sections, each research question is answered and explored.

### **5.2.1 Emotional Safety in OLEs a Prerequisite for Identity Expression and Self-Disclosure**

The first research question posed in this study was "*To what extent are feelings of emotional safety connected to the expression of identity within an HE OLE?*" Within the parameters of qualitative research design, feeling emotionally safe is part of learners' criterion for feeling comfortable enough to voluntarily self-disclose and express aspects of their identity.

In Chapter 2, I reviewed literature specifically pertaining to emotional safety within OLEs in HE. The research is quite limited, which creates an opportunity for educational researchers to pursue this topic area in more depth. The research that does exist pertains more to emotions in learning within traditional style environments. Feelings of safety (i.e., emotional or psychological safety) within an OLE stem from positive emotions with an absence of fears and anxieties. A combination of high levels of positive emotions, such as excitement and pleasure, with a lack of negative emotions helps create an emotionally safe learning environment (Bogolyubova & Kiseleva, 2016). Positive emotions of learners within an OLE can be fostered as positive emotions have an affirming effect on motivation, academic

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performance, identity development, personal growth, and wellbeing (Ainley, 2008; Artino, 2012; Jackson, 2010; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014a; Pekrun & Stephens, 2010; Schutz & Pekrun, 2007). Given this effect on learners and how emotionally safe OLEs support QA measures, emotional safety in an OLE in HE is a critical priority for continued educational research and for application in teaching practice.

However, the predominant emotion noted was fear, and there are many plausible explanations for why this was so. One, perhaps participants felt more comfortable sharing situations that were easy to recall or situations that had caused frustration or angst were at the forefront of their mind or that sharing these experiences would assist in improving their immediate situation or overall learning experience. Two, some learners and instructors were keen to help WCC in an applied research initiative, so perhaps sharing their fears and anxieties were their way of providing constructive feedback to the college. Three, the research questions elicited negative responses. I was concerned at the onset of this study that my biases in the design and execution of the interview questions steered participants towards the expression of negative emotions. However, after careful reflection and with a neutral interview schedule purposefully designed and piloted, I believe this reason was negated.

Four, the interview environment and schedule were thoughtfully and pedagogically designed, thus allowing participants to consider the interview environment a safe place. Confidentiality and anonymity measures were also in place and communicated to participants, perhaps allowing for more

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openness and truthfulness. An emotionally safe space provides "an experience in which one feels safe to express emotions, security, and confidence to take risks" (National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments, 2019, para.1). My intent was for participants to feel safe while being interviewed, but without clear data to support this, it is just a hypothesis or desire.

Five, as 17 of the 18 participants were female, gender may have played a role in the expression of fear within an OLE. It has been well documented that females experience higher levels of anxiety and social anxiety disorders than their male counterparts, sometimes at a ratio of 2:1 (Asher & Aderka, 2017; Stoyanova & Hope, 2011; Zeidner, 2014). Again, fear and anxiety can be interchangeable concepts, especially in the minds of learners and instructors (Jackson, 2018). In their study with undergraduate learners in the US, Zalta and Chambless (2012) found that "gender differences in anxiety are associated with societal reinforcement of different gender roles and learning experiences for men and women" (p. 493). To help overcome this, Zalta and Chambless contended that individuals, especially girls and women, who build "instrumental traits and develop a sense of mastery may decrease risk of anxiety" (2012, p. 495); for example, targeted learning activities promote healthy competition, assertiveness, and independence (2012, p. 496). These findings could be integrated into current instructional design and QA measures. Gender and its role in feeling emotionally safe within OLEs, however, is complex and needs further research. It is difficult to say with any

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certainty that gender was a factor in the high frequency of fear reported by participants.

With five possible reasons for why negative emotions were expressed more often than positive emotions, I am left believing that the fears expressed by the participants were real to them and therefore something they desired to share. Fears expressed by Courtney (L) are representative of fears learners expressed in this study: "Everyone wants to ask this question, but you don't want to say anything." Perhaps, learners do not want to say anything because the OLE is not emotionally safe, or, as Amanda's (I) response demonstrated, they are being assessed:

Whether it is anxiety or fear of expressing thoughts and opinions and...being graded for that and...having that instructor involved with work placement. So, there is a fear that, "Well, if I really say what I am thinking, then I'm not going to get a good job...If I express something and I am vulnerable, what happens to that information? Is it like Facebook when I say something and it's going to haunt me in 10 years?"

To answer the research question concerning the extent to which emotional safety is connected to the expression of identity within an HE OLE, a connection was evident in the data. In the absence of emotional safety, fears arise and impede learners' desire to self-disclose or share aspects of their identity. The connection between emotional safety and expression of identity could be fostered to the benefit of both online learners and instructors as well as integrated into QA measures at HEIs in Canada. Further research in this area would be beneficial to quality learning and QA initiatives pertaining to emotional safety.

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## **5.2.2 Emotionally Safe OLEs, Identity Expression, and Self-Disclosure: An Important Topic in HE**

The second research question posed in this study was "*Is the expression of identity and feelings of emotional safety within HE OLEs important to learners and instructors?*" Considering my biases as a researcher (see section 3.3), and not wanting to generalise findings, answering this research question is complex, as each participant expressed their own truths and realities about whether this topic was of any importance. My general impression after data analysis, however, was yes, this was important to many participants, though several instructors had not considered this topic properly before the interviews.

There are two reasons why this topic was important to participants. The reasons presented are speculative in nature, but heavily influenced by my data analysis. One, from years of experience, seasoned instructors already understood the role that emotional safety and identity expression play within their OLE, thereby explaining the level of importance that they placed on this topic. Two, after exploring this topic and sharing experiences during the interview, the learners better understood this topic and thus began to place a higher sense of importance on it. The question of importance was situated towards the end of the interview.

There are two exceptions to these reasons, which illustrates again the complexity of answering this research question in generalities. First, not all instructors interviewed were experienced in teaching in an OLE and as such

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had not given this topic much thought. At the onset of the interviews, instructors shared their experience teaching online. Many responded that they had taught only one course online, compared to their traditional classroom experience. Katie's (I) response shows her reflecting on her teaching practice while speaking in the interview.

Maybe before the start of a class where we are starting to engage and sort of "give, give, give" without me as the instructor at the beginning giving very much either...yah. I guess to think more about how them having express a sense of identity sort of in the course work, how that relates to what they are turning in and being graded on. Yah. I definitely will be thinking more about that.

As explored in Chapter 2, HE instructors often have abrupt beginnings to their online teaching, having taught the classroom version of the course and then being assigned to teach the OLE with little to no training or support. This type of experience is challenging and can be disheartening to instructors (Schmidt et al., 2013). Instructional strategies and best practices for teaching online are often not realised or explored until someone has taught for an extended period. As such, when the instructors heard about emotional safety in the interview, it may have become suddenly important to them or they may have feared saying "no" during the interview. A topic such as emotional safety may not be as prioritised or even known against other instructional skills, such as adjusting to a new teaching medium. Preparedness to teach online is an import aspect of quality learning, to establishing teaching presence, and to increasing learner satisfaction. If instructors are relatively new to teaching online, it is understandable that the topic of emotional safety and identity expression are not at the forefront of their minds. Further research would be

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needed to substantiate this view as well as explore what topic areas are of importance to instructors teaching in an OLE for the first time.

Second, emotions in learning and thus the topic of emotional safety is relatively under-researched and has not reached a type of critical mass that would impact teaching practices across HE OLEs in Canada. Typically, emotions in learning have been viewed as disruptive and even inconsequential compared to issues pertaining to cognition, or learning (Shuman et al., 2014). The newness of this topic may be why these instructors had not considered nor integrated it into their teaching practice or instructional design.

In terms of the research question on the importance of identity expression and self-disclosure, there were again varied responses. The mixture of results, however, is what is interesting during data analysis. I believe the mixture of responses centred, to some extent, on comfort level and trust to express identity or self-disclose to peers and experiences with mandatory participation in discussion forums. Voluntarily expression of one's identity in a trusted and emotionally safe learning environment with trusted peers differs substantially from mandatory participation within a discussion forum that requires self-disclosure of personal information with no trust established or with palpable power dynamics. As previously cited, emotional safety is "an experience in which one feels safe to express emotions, security, and confidence to take risks and feel challenged and excited to try something new" (National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments, 2019, para.1). Amanda's (I) fears for her learners seem appropriate. Her learners' reality is that their self-



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disclosures and expressions of identity are being assessed and then their work placement is regulated by the same assessor (i.e., their instructor). Fear can breed feelings of distrust, which is the opposite of what is needed to have an emotionally safe OLE. Distrust can also lead to feelings of vulnerability, risk, suspicion, doubts, lack of confidence, or uneasiness (Bewsell, 2012).

Andromeda Jane (L) summarised this finding as well, and her response is representative of several learner responses towards identity expression and self-disclosure within OLEs.

I think it is extremely important, yes. When you are able to apply the classroom to my values, interests, and beliefs, it opens a conversation for them to share their values, interests, and beliefs. And then I'm able to grasp how everyone is different, different values, and interests. Gives me a more open mind...Not just focusing on all my values, interests, and beliefs, like that's the most important, yah.

Based on the findings in this study, I believe that expression of identity and self-disclosure within an emotionally safe OLE were important to many participants in this study. Fears that were expressed pertained to breaches in emotional safety, data security concerns, humiliation, cultural differences, and other types of social anxieties.

### **5.2.3 Identity Expression Within Emotionally Safe OLEs: Perceived Impact on Grades**

The third research question posed in this study was, "*Does the expression of identity in an OLE have a perceived positive impact on learners' grades?*"

The impact on grades was explored in this research because it is often a measurement or critical component of quality at WCC. Not to generalise the

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findings of 18 unique interviews, but, there was consensus among both instructors and learners that expressing aspects of identity within their OLEs translated to an improvement in grades. If learners and instructors feel trusting within an emotionally safe OLE, they are more likely to self-disclose and share aspects of their identity, leading to positive effects on academic achievement. This research study did not have any quantitative data to further substantiate their claims (i.e., pre- and post-analysis of grades), but rather their perception that this was true for them. A quantitative or mixed methods approach to this research question would be an interesting educational research initiative.

Jin (L) responded with a definitive answer to this research question: "Yes, I think it leads to better grades because I am more engaged, and I am more interested" as did Cameron (I):

I would now say definitely 100% yes. I think learners can be successful to a certain level—i.e., they pass, they get decent grades. But once they start putting their identity and personality into something, their grades do go up. That they are putting that extra effort into things and you do see that distinct difference between those types of learners.

Some distinctions that were noted in Chapter 4 (see section 4.3.4) were blurring of engagement, self-disclosure, identity expression, and relatable content. It remains unclear whether some learners understood differences or drew distinctions among these. Further research would assist in exploring these topics with learners to better ascertain how they view these topics, how they define these topics, and which one affected their grades.

To conclude this research question, identity expression within OLE is seen as important, is perceived to impact grades, and relates to quality learning, but

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has not received enough attention or discussion in educational research, within instructional practice, or within QA measures being undertaken within HEIs.

#### **5.2.4 Instructors Play a Significant Role in the Creation and Maintenance of an Emotionally Safe OLE**

The final research question posed in this research study was "*What role does an HE instructor play in creating and maintaining an emotionally safe OLE?*"

Analysis of the data suggests that an HE instructor plays a significant role in the creation and maintenance of an emotionally safe OLE. In doing so, the HE instructor contributes to the quality of learning at the HEI and the overall learner experience.

Based on the Schindler et al. (2015) conceptual model on quality (see Figure 2.2), instructors are stakeholders or "employees of the sector." As stakeholders, instructors are central to quality of learning and learning experiences, especially in the transformative conceptualisation of quality.

There is existing research that instructors can explore pertaining to instructional design strategies and instructor preparedness (e.g., Kearns & Mancilla, 2017; Legon, 2015; Loafman & Altman, 2014). The Quality Matters Rubric and the PDPIE model created by UBC are other useful tools for designing quality OLEs. For facilitating an emotionally safe OLE, research pertaining to teaching presence is insightful (e.g., Anderson, Rouke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Meyer, 2003; Shea et al., 2006).

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With the significant role that learners perceived instructors to play in creating and maintaining an emotionally safe OLE, it is noteworthy that many of the instructors in this study had not considered this within their own teaching practice or in the design of their courses. Educational development can certainly provide targeted support to HE instructors (Contact North, 2015). For instance, Julie (I) reflected on her preparedness to address emotional safety and identity expression in her OLE. She was upset by the lack of educational development she had received.

That's the thing, we just have to do a better job of this. Absolutely. That to me is the biggest problem. We are not being trained in how to do this, it's sort of haphazard...I would like more, like a half-day session, on some of these skills because it really is a skill on how to do these things and the detail they're providing us is so basic.

When asked what could be done to make instructors feel safe, Amanda (I) stated that the college has a responsibility for training instructors and ensuring that instructors feel safe and prepared: "Continue to give them training. The director supporting your work." Stacey (I) also commented:

I guess the ongoing...training, say, for someone that is teaching online. Often people get thrown into those roles without a lot of, maybe like the professional development maybe hasn't happened for them. So, "Ok, you teach here. You can just teach online," which I saw a few times. And although it is a great learning experience, I think it's just as scary for some people, for some instructors to be teaching online as it is for learners to be learning online. So, if we say, "We're going to do these things for learners to be feeling better and safer or more involved or whatever it is," then the college should have those things in place. So, the same issues of feelings, of safety, or whatever for a learner, then so should an instructor of that same course also have that level of support from the college. So, if something is not going well, so having known who they can go to and say, "Hey, I tried this in the classroom. I've tried it a hundred times before and it works great and for some reason it's not happening in this course. Help me sort it out." I guess I see that's where their responsibility lying from the college.

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Often, as online HE programs and courses are being developed and delivered, the focus is on the content and outcomes of the material. During the qualitative interviews, learners expressed reservations about the level of detail of the private information being requested. In some courses, it is essential to the objectives and content of the course. In others, it may be asked in an online equivalent of getting to know each other. In a classroom setting people can see faces and hear voices. What is said is not stored in a physical way, such as an audio or video recording. This is not the same in online courses. In developing online courses, developers need to examine how much personal information is needed to meet the requirements of the course.

In some online courses the instructor is also involved in the recruitment, placement, or recommendations for employment of learners. Indeed, this is the purpose of some of courses. Instructors in such situations need to be aware that the fear of future job placement can have an adverse effect on the sense of security in expressing their ideas. Katie (I) stated:

I don't think I've really thought about it in a concrete enough way. So, to clearly express why, saying in terms of their learning, their journey...the ones that are sort of comfortable and confident in expressing their identity probably are going to be more confident in expressing their ideas, what they think about a particular text. Maybe that building up the comfort level talking about who you are and what you think relates kind of to the critical writing we are asking them to do.

This study demonstrated that instructors play a significant role in creating and maintaining emotionally safe OLEs in HE. As such, educational development and training initiatives could be targeted to increase HE instructors' confidence and competence in teaching and creating emotionally safe OLEs.

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### 5.3 Other Findings: Data Security

Even though I did not set out to examine data security in this research, it emerged as a major finding. Confidentiality, access, and retention of online content have implications for policies at HE institutions and for future practice. There were a variety of reasons for the expression of concern (e.g., being in a domestic abuse relationship). Some participants were concerned about how their shared information was retained and used: Who has access to it? How long is it going to be retained? Answering these types of questions is part of the larger QA conversation within online learning at HE institutions.

There are several further complicating factors for HE institutions. For example, courses are developed around various assumptions, and sometimes it is assumed that learners are local, whereas they may be anywhere in the world. A growing number of learners taking online courses are from outside of the country and thus subject to different rules of law. Data gets presented and learner responses and discussions are often mandated. This takes place not only with a host computer, but also in an end-to-end connection to the location of the learner.

There are technology concerns around data. Is the connection encrypted (i.e., safe)? If it is encrypted, will encryption create issues for learners in the country where they are located? Backups of data systems occur to protect data. Should the online content of each course have a best before date and be deleted at agreed (or mandated) lengths of time?

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These concerns need to include those involved in technical support and backup, not just instructors/learners. Such questions are not new to Information Technology (IT) departments but are just a sample of the many new issues HE institutions need to address surrounding online courses.

For many years, higher education has dealt with freedom of information and access. Does this need to be examined from a learner or instructor point of view? What if there is a complaint or human resources issue and the data needs to be preserved or accessed? Many new policies and regulations need to be examined and they will need to be communicated to learners in a way that enables them to know, ahead of time, the implications for themselves. For example, a statement such as "your online discussion is available only to the members of the class and will be retained for this period of time" would be important to improving feelings of security in expressing ideas and identity.

#### **5.4 Implications for Theory, Research, Practice and HE Policy**

This study and its findings have implications for educational theory, educational research, practice and HE policy.

##### **5.4.1 Theory**

Illeris' structural model of identity and learning and identity theory (2014a, 2014b) was chosen as a lens or framework by which transformative quality learning as depicted by Schindler et al.'s (2015) conceptual model of quality learning could be achieved. Illeris' (2014a) part-identities relating to practices such as work identity or family identity was discussed by all eighteen

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participants. The findings of this study suggest that identity expression and emotional safety were important to both learner and instructor participants. The perception of this study's participants was that expression of identity within an emotional safe OLE that included positive social interactions with peers and the instructor positively impacted their academic success. This upholds Illeris' (2014a) theory wherein learning and identity are interlinked, identity is central to learning and necessary for transformative learning, which results in a change.

#### **5.4.2 Research**

As a result of this study, further educational research opportunities and research implications are presented in the following list.

- There is insufficient literature pertaining to emotional safety and identity expression in OLEs in HE. Would the findings of another study such as this being repeated at another HEI be similar or dissimilar? What about with a larger sample size?
- Trust is an important component of emotionally safe OLEs. How do HE instructors build trust with learners within an OLE? How do learners build trust with peers and with the instructor?
- Given that other stakeholders at WCC were not included in this study, if asked, what would those other stakeholders say about emotional safety and expression of identity within OLEs at WCC? Is it of any importance to them? Do they see this as a quality issue? What would they say about teacher preparedness



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with respect to creating and maintaining an emotionally safe OLE?

- Further work is needed examining gender and anxiety within learning, specifically gender and anxiety in OLEs in HE.
- Mandatory participation and sharing of personal information in OLEs were brought up by several learners in this study. A further study investigating the impact of mandatory participation on emotional safety in OLEs is warranted to ascertain whether this practice activates or deactivates their emotions.

### **5.4.3 Practice**

There are several implications for instructional design and teaching practices that emerged from this research study. Instructional designers form a networked community of practitioners that produce an impressive amount of research pertaining to course design, learner engagement, and QA strategies, especially for HE OLEs. The findings from this study could be integrated into their approaches insofar as designing learning activities that include more visual contact between peers and the instructor to help establish emotional safety, front-loading OLEs with information on communicating, respect and netiquette, and introductory style activities. Other areas to consider integrating into design are detailed outlines, assignment due dates, and purposeful discussion regarding posting questions, including the requirement to back up opinions with scholarly references. The MANIC is another strategy that could be integrated to provide structure to online forums. Finally, learners in this study appreciated when they could customise assignments and assessments

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and integrate and personalise what they were learning, and they felt it contributed to their success, making this strategy open to consideration.

The findings of this study and the reviewed literature highlighted instructor preparedness to teach online and technology literacy, including timely and targeted educational development of faculty (i.e., instructors). Investing in the skills and attitudes of instructors will transfer to their teaching practice and to the facilitation of an OLE and is critical to QA. In addition, learner satisfaction in OLEs has been linked to instructors and their involvement in the course (Owston et al., 2013). If instructors feel prepared and emotionally ready to teach and facilitate an OLE, then their learners become benefactors.

#### **5.4.4. HE Policy**

One major area stemming from the findings of this study with implications to HE policy was data security. Data security is a complex and vast area involving numerous stakeholders and subject matter experts. Areas for consideration may include access rights, retention of data, security of data, responsibility of the HEI and all stakeholders to ensure data security, geographical dispersion of learners not under the purview of Canadian law, ongoing support and awareness for faculty, staff and learners, as well as appropriate consideration of all ethical scenarios that often arise while within an OLE. Data security is important as it supports and emotionally safe OLE where learners and instructors feel safe and respected enough to share and self-disclose.

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## **5.5 Contribution to Knowledge**

There are four ways this research study contributes to educational research. One, the learning and identity theory of Knud Illeris (2007, 2014a, 2014b, 2015, 2018a) became the basis of my theoretical framework. It is a novel approach that supports the emerging notion that identity is intrinsically connected to and centrally positioned within the overall learning process. Two, perspectives and experiences of both instructors and learners on this topic were gathered, which is uncharacteristic within educational research, yet arguably critical when developing a comprehensive understanding of such topics and in the design and provision of HE supports and services. The participating instructors and learners offered unique perspectives and experiences, but were ultimately analogous towards online emotional safety and identity expression. Three, this research study extends the sparsely researched area of emotional safety in conjunction with identity expression within HE OLEs and confirmed its importance and role in obtaining QA. Four, the findings support the importance of an emotionally safe OLE and how an emotionally safe OLE can positively impact learner's grades and experience. This area has received little attention within current research or teaching practices.

## **5.6 Limitations**

There are at least two major limitations of this research study worth noting. One, this research study had a relatively small sample size (n=18), as previously identified, and the study did not represent a true cross-section of

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the WCC learner and instructor population. In my opinion, it would be worthwhile to repeat this study on a larger scale and across all programs areas at WCC to see if similar results would be found.

Two, the overall timeframe and duration of gathering data for this research study was arguably short. Data gathering occurred within the span of two semesters (September – February). The ethics clearance provided by WCC had strict stipulations on the timeframe in which data could be gathered. Being ethically responsible, I honoured these stipulations, thus following a short timeframe for gathering data. This study's findings may have been altered with a longer timeframe to generate data and recruit more participants.

Conducting qualitative research has several general limitations that should be briefly highlighted, such as dependence on my skills as a researcher and data analyst, the fact that data analysis is time-consuming, and issues of anonymity and confidentiality that create potential issues in presenting the data (Anderson, 2010). These are not major to this study but are of some note. I have tried to position my biases and my experiences at WCC within this study to address some of these concerns. In Chapter 4, I will present the findings using pseudonyms in a clear manner.

## **5.7 Growth as a Researcher**

Completing the coursework and writing this thesis was an invaluable experience, resulting in what I believe to be both personal and professional growth. The process I undertook solidified the notion that I truly enjoy the process of research, even when faced with both personal and research

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related challenges. Writing this thesis has deepened my interest in conducting further research on identity expression and emotional safety online in Higher Education. My perspectives toward educational development of instructors has broadened and my support widened to embrace the emotions that are emoted when designing and teaching online. The notion of creating safe online learning spaces for both learners and instructors has become part of my support conversations.

For future research projects, I would use NVivo from the onset for every aspect of the process. NVivo is powerful tool and I did not fully realize its potential until entering the data entry and analysis phase for this project. I would especially integrate the literature I reviewed as well as my critical analysis.

## **5.8 Summary**

This study set out to examine emotional safety and identity expression within OLEs at a Canadian college and ascertain its importance and impact on grades. Using single-site methodology and qualitative interviewing, nine instructors and nine learners (n=18) at WCC were successfully recruited. A comprehensive research design strategy was created, and an interview schedule piloted. Seventeen (n=17) telephone interviews and one in-person interview were conducted.

Emotional safety and identity expression within an OLE are situated under the larger research umbrella of quality and transformative learning. The Schindler

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et al. (2015) conceptual model illustrated this point as well as the complexities of defining and assuring quality learning in HE. Quality learning and QA measures have been strategically placed within policies and practices across many Canadian HEIs, including WCC. Although Canada does not have a centralised education system, there are some QA initiatives in place, most at a provincial, territorial, or institutional level. However, these disconnected quality initiatives will likely be insufficient with the continued rise of online enrolment at Canadian HEIs, increasing number of international learners attending Canadian HEIs, globalisation of programming, and an ever-expanding e-marketplace.

Quality assurance measures are prevalent in the research but focus more on instructional design and evaluation. Emotional safety and expression of identity have yet to garner much attention within quality learning and QA research. Illeris' (2014a) identity model was positioned as the theoretical framework for this study, in part because of this lack of research, but also because it positions identity centrally within the learning process. If quality of learning is to be achieved, then issues pertaining to identity need to be conjunctively better understood and researched.

Emotional safety is better understood after exploring emotions and emotions in learning. Emotions are connected to academic achievement, motivation, performance, identity development, personal growth, and overall wellbeing, but can negatively impact achieving learning outcomes, success, and experience (Ainley, 2008; Arguel et al., 2019; Artino, 2012; Jackson, 2010; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014; Pekrun & Stephens, 2010; Schutz &

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Pekrun, 2007; Zembylas, 2003). Many participants expressed negative emotions such as fear and anxiety. Negative emotions can be mitigated in many ways, such as through application of scholarly instructional design strategies and establishing teaching presence.

The importance of establishing a teaching presence was another finding that is consistent with other research findings. Teaching presence provides a critical bridge between the learners and the instructor and is linked with higher-order thinking (Anderson et al., 2001; Garrison et al., 2010; Meyer, 2003), the establishment of online learning communities (Shea et al., 2006), and learner engagement. The role of the instructor in mitigating negative emotions and creating an emotionally safe OLE thus becomes critical. Trust needs to be established for trusting behaviours, such as identity expression, to occur within the OLE. Sharing of identity, by both learners and the instructor, was perceived to positively impact grades.

Data security became another finding of this study as participants raised concerns over retention of their data and privacy preferences within the OLE. Data security concerns in HE is a vast and complex topic area, especially with the emergence of ever-evolving technologies. Data security within HE is burgeoning with opportunities for further research, with a special focus on how data security, or lack thereof, could affect learners' and instructors' sense of emotional safety and willingness to express aspects of their identity.

After analysis of the data, a qualitative argument for this research study was formulated and supported evidentially with qualitative data. *Emotional safety*

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*and identity expression are part of transformational, quality learning. Feeling safe within an OLE is a necessary condition for learners to express aspects of their identity, resulting in a perceived increase in grades. Identity expression in OLEs thus becomes important to teaching and learning and the conditions for sharing identity online ought to be encouraged and enhanced. The role of the instructor is paramount in achieving this aspect of quality in online learning.*



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**Note:** In the interests of participant and institutional anonymity, the URL referencing WCC has been edited and is thus non-functioning.

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## Appendix: Quality Matters Rubric

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### Specific Review Standards from the QM Higher Education Rubric, Sixth Edition

General Standards	Specific Review Standards	Points
<b>Course Overview and Introduction</b>	1.1 Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components.	3
	1.2 Learners are introduced to the purpose and structure of the course.	3
	1.3 Communication expectations for online discussions, email, and other forms of interaction are clearly stated.	2
	1.4 Course and institutional policies with which the learner is expected to comply are clearly stated within the course, or a link to current policies is provided.	2
	1.5 Minimum technology requirements for the course are clearly stated, and information on how to obtain the technologies is provided.	2
	1.6 Computer skills and digital information literacy skills expected of the learner are clearly stated.	1
	1.7 Expectations for prerequisite knowledge in the discipline and/or any required competencies are clearly stated.	1
	1.8 The self-introduction by the instructor is professional and is available online.	1
	1.9 Learners are asked to introduce themselves to the class.	1
<b>Learning Objectives (Competencies)</b>	2.1 The course learning objectives, or course/program competencies, describe outcomes that are measurable.	3
	2.2 The module/unit-level learning objectives or competencies describe outcomes that are measurable and consistent with the course-level objectives or competencies.	3
	2.3 Learning objectives or competencies are stated clearly, are written from the learner's perspective, and are prominently located in the course.	3
	2.4 The relationship between learning objectives or competencies and learning activities is clearly stated.	3
	2.5 The learning objectives or competencies are suited to the level of the course.	3
<b>Assessment and Measurement</b>	3.1 The assessments measure the achievement of the stated learning objectives or competencies.	3
	3.2 The course grading policy is stated clearly at the beginning of the course.	3
	3.3 Specific and descriptive criteria are provided for the evaluation of learners' work, and their connection to the course grading policy is clearly explained.	3
	3.4 The assessments used are sequenced, varied, and suited to the level of the course.	2
	3.5 The course provides learners with multiple opportunities to track their learning progress with timely feedback.	2
<b>Instructional Materials</b>	4.1 The instructional materials contribute to the achievement of the stated learning objectives or competencies.	3
	4.2 The relationship between the use of instructional materials in the course and completing learning activities is clearly explained.	3
	4.3 The course models the academic integrity expected of learners by providing both source references and permissions for use of instructional materials.	2
	4.4 The instructional materials represent up-to-date theory and practice in the discipline.	2
	4.5 A variety of instructional materials is used in the course.	2
<b>Learning Activities and Learner Interaction</b>	5.1 The learning activities promote the achievement of the stated learning objectives or competencies.	3
	5.2 Learning activities provide opportunities for interaction that support active learning.	3
	5.3 The instructor's plan for interacting with learners during the course is clearly stated.	3
	5.4 The requirements for learner interaction are clearly stated.	2
<b>Course Technology</b>	6.1 The tools used in the course support the learning objectives or competencies.	3
	6.2 Course tools promote learner engagement and active learning.	3
	6.3 A variety of technology is used in the course.	1
	6.4 The course provides learners with information on protecting their data and privacy.	1
<b>Learner Support</b>	7.1 The course instructions articulate or link to a clear description of the technical support offered and how to obtain it.	3
	7.2 Course instructions articulate or link to the institution's accessibility policies and services.	3
	7.3 Course instructions articulate or link to the institution's academic support services and resources that can help learners succeed in the course.	3
	7.4 Course instructions articulate or link to the institution's student services and resources that can help learners succeed.	1
<b>Accessibility* and Usability</b>	8.1 Course navigation facilitates ease of use.	3
	8.2 The course design facilitates readability.	3
	8.3 The course provides accessible text and images in files, documents, LMS pages, and web pages to meet the needs of diverse learners.	3
	8.4 The course provides alternative means of access to multimedia content in formats that meet the needs of diverse learners.	2
	8.5 Course multimedia facilitate ease of use.	2
	8.6 Vendor accessibility statements are provided for all technologies required in the course.	2

\* Meeting QM Specific Review Standards regarding accessibility does not guarantee or imply that the specific accessibility regulations of any country are met. Consult with an accessibility specialist to ensure that accessibility regulations are met.

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